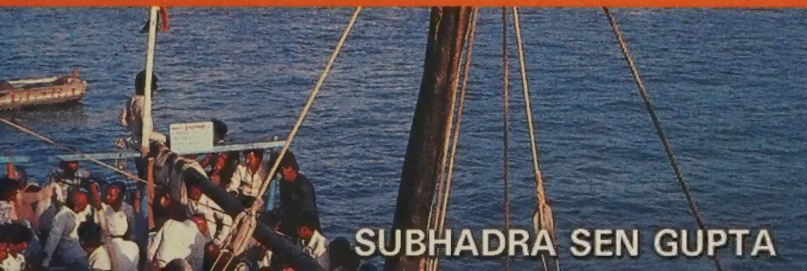
Dwarka

Krishna's Dhaam by the Sea



SUBHADRA SEN GUPTA

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Rameshwaram: Lord Rama's Sacred Dhaam

DWARKA

Krishna's Dhaam by the Sea

Subhadra Sen Gupta

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CHAPTER ONE

Going on a Tirtha

"The gods always play where lakes are, where the sun's rays are warded off by umbrellas of lotus leaf clusters, and where clear water paths are made by swans, whose breasts toss the white lotuses hither and thither; where swans, ducks, curlews and paddy birds are heard and animals rest nearby in the shade of Nicula trees on the river banks."

— places where gods dwell as described in the *Brihat Samhita*

The *Chaar Dhaam* are among the most sacred places of pilgrimage for Hindus, and these four sites are among their first destinations when they wish to go on a *tirtha*. For Hindus a place of pilgrimage is a *tirtha* or *tirthasthana*, a pilgrimage is a *tirtha* or *tirthayatra* and a pilgrim is a *tirthayatri*. Hindus believe a *tirthasthana* to be a sacred space charged with divine power and purity. A *tirtha* is resonant with three elements that make it so sacred — it is *shuchi*, pure; it brings *punya*, merit and goodness and it is *shubha*, auspicious. The act of

pilgrimage is praised in many ancient texts, like the *Aitareya Brahamana* says,

"Flower-like are the heels of the wanderer
Thus his body grows and is fruitful
All his sins disappear
Slain by the toil of his journeying."

Hindu tradition states that a *tirtha* is a place where you can gain *nirvana*, true enlightenment, and also achieve *moksha*, a liberation from the endless cycle of life and death. However for a Hindu, who worships every aspect of what is good and sacred in life and nature, a *tirtha* does not have to be a specific place or a temple. It can be anywhere — by the banks of a holy river, at the foot of a mountain, under a sacred tree and even at the feet of a great saint or guru. In the tolerant and life enhancing beliefs of Hinduism, a *tirthasthana* and a *tirthyatra*, are finally a state of mind and you find it where you seek it. A *tirtha* is a spiritual goal, as the *Skanda Purana* states, "Truth, forgiveness, control of senses, kindness to all living beings and simplicity are also *tirthas*."

From the time of the Vedas there has been a tradition of the veneration of rivers and many *tirthas* came up beside them. However for Hindus the landscape itself — hills, rivers, trees, rocks, pools and the sea are all holy. Rivers like the Ganga and Godavari are sacred, so are hills like Kailash and Arunachala, the river island of Omkareshwar and the island of Rameshwaram and Kanyakumari on the sea are all *tirthas*. A temple often marks this sacred space and it houses the image of a deity in the sanctum, but the sanctity of the place often begins with it being a scenic place because a Hindu sees the

enerous spirit of God everywhere in nature. Every aspect of reation is luminous with holiness, you just need the eyes to ee them.

This veneration of nature has led to temples being built in specially picturesque places. One can discover the ruins of ong forgotten temples in the most remote places of the ountry. Most often they are built near water, by the banks of ivers, by the seashore and beside lakes, because of the need or ritual purification before worship. The presence of flowing vater and the confluence of streams makes the spot even more uspicious. Temples also come up on hills, on islands in rivers, n forests, beside waterfalls, in inaccessible caves and on islands long the seashore.

When an aspect of nature is combined with other spiritual lements a great *tirtha* is created. For instance, Varanasi, (also alled Benaras and Kashi), is considered supreme among all Hindu *tirthasthanas*. It offers the pilgrim the combination of a reat river, a powerful god and a venerable temple — of the Ganga, the most sacred of the rivers, the presence of a great od, Lord Shiva and an ancient shrine, the Kashi Vishwanath emple. Similarly, Puri has the presence of Lord Vishnu, the amous Jagannatha Temple and a sacred festival of the *Rath Yatra*. The ancient history and traditions of these *tirthas* make nem even more sacred, as the places are replete with myths nd legends and vibrant with ancient rituals and festivals. To isit a great *tirtha* is to touch the very soul of this many faceted and called India.

The word 'tirtha' literally means a ford, a place along a river vhere it can be crossed easily. Many *tirthas* are in fact placed long such fords. However the word has a much deeper

significance. A *tirtha* is not just a crossing on this earth, it is a spiritual crossing between this mortal world of *samsara* and the heaven of *swarga*, where you seek redemption for your actions and liberation. So at a *tirtha*, as you row through the river of *samsara*, you move from the world of *marta* below to *swarga* above in a journey often described as travelling from 'this shore' of existence to the 'far shore' of *moksha*.

The *tirthas* of the seven *saptapuris* and four *dhaams* are called "mokshadayika" because they promise the pilgrim the supreme liberation of *moksha*. The Hindu believes that the soul never dies and that we are born again and again into an illusory mortal world of *samsara*. Our actions during our lives, which is our *karma*, often include a multitude of sins, and it is our *karma* that will determine our birth once more on earth to atone for those sins. Going to these *tirthas*, worshipping in their temples, bathing in their rivers and tanks, frees us from this burden of sins and also liberates us from the endless cycle of births and deaths. A *tirthayatra* makes it possible for our souls to merge with the supreme oneness of the Brahman.

Surprisingly, *tirthas* are not just places where mortals reach out to heaven. Hindu myths tell us that they are like celestial pathways along which the gods also descend to earth. For instance, when evil is on the rise, Vishnu as the benign Lord of Preservation, often comes to earth in various incarnations to restore the presence of good. So wherever these incarnations, called *avatars*, were born, the places of their birth also became *tirthas*. Thus Ayodhya where Rama was born and Mathura where Krishna was born and which he ruled are among the seven most sacred of *tirthas*, the *Saptapuris*. Varanasi is a *tirtha* because Shiva chose it as his earthly home and came to live there with his consort Parvati.

As it is a place connected to heaven, a *tirtha* is also where e devout come to die. For instance, many Hindus have a ssionate desire to die in Varanasi because it is resonant with e power of purity and goodness that makes the crossing sier. The auspicious presence of God helps further in gaining ue *moksha*. In Varanasi, it is Shiva Himself who is the atman on this spiritual river and it is he who rows the soul ross, intoning the sacred *Taraka mantra* that ves absolute liberation. The Jains also believe in the power *tirthas* to provide *moksha* and they call their saints, *thankaras*, 'ford makers', as these saints release souls from the usory world of *samsara* and take them to the serenity and ace of *swarga*.

Tirthas are also created by myths, like the *peethasthanas*, the eats' of the Mother Goddess, universally called Devi. Many these *peethasthanas* are connected to the myth of the death Shiva's wife, Sati. There are fifty one *peethasthanas* where rts of Sati's body fell and here the temples of the Mother oddess consecrate her *shakti*, her divine power. The places nnected to the myth of the *jyotirlingam*, where Shiva nsformed himself into an incandescent *lingam* of light, are so great *tirthas*. The twelve *tirthas* of *jyotirlingams* have mples with *shivalingams* called *swayambhu*, self manifest, and ey are sacred to the worshippers of Shiva. Vishnu's myths ve created his four 'abodes' — the *Chaar Dhaam* — and 108 his most sacred temples are called *Divya Desams*.

he *Tirthas* of *Saptapuri* and *Chaar Dhaam*

he *tirthas* of ancient times are mentioned in many books. The *ahabharata* is one the largest sources for information on

tirthas in the early years of the first millenium. The *Puranas*, written between the 4th and 7th century AD and books like *Kritya Kalpataru* of Bhatta Lakshmidhara written in the 12th century also list a large number of places of pilgrimage. The traveller Alberuni who came to India in the 11th century gives descriptions of many *tirthas* and the Mughal historian Abul Fazl, writing in the 16th century, lists many *tirthas* in the Ain-i-Akbari. Among all the lists there are ten *tirthas* that remain the most sacred — the *Saptapuri* and *Chaar Dhaam*.

There is a Sanskrit *shloka* that Hindu pilgrims recite when they visit *tirthas*. The simple verse lists the seven greatest *tirthas* of the land, the *Saptapuris*.

> *"Kashi, Kanchi, Maya, Ayodhya, Avantika.*
> *Mathura, Dwaravati chaiva saptaita mokshadayika."*

The *shloka* says that, Kashi, Kanchi, Maya, Ayodhya, Avantika, Mathura and Dwaravati are the seven *puris*. And these *Saptapuris* offer the liberation of *moksha*. These seven sacred cities are also called 'mokshapuris' and they are the *tirthas* of Kashi (Varanasi, Benaras), Kanchi (Kanchipuram), Mayapuri (Haridwar), Ayodhya, Avantika (Ujjain), Mathura and Dwaravati (Dwarka).

Next to the *Saptapuris* are the four *tirthas* of *Chaar Dhaam*. These *tirthas* are called *dhaam* as they are believed to be the sacred abodes of Vishnu and his *avatars*. The *Chaar Dhaams* are Badrinath, Puri, Dwarka and Rameshwaram. As the *dhaam* of Dwarka is also a *Saptapuri*, it makes it even more sacred. So the list of the holiest *tirthas* of the Hindus comes to ten places of pilgrimage.

In ancient times, pilgrims who ventured out on arduous
ırneys to the *tirthas* must have been the oldest travellers in
story. For the devout Hindu, the attainment of *moksha* is
e's truest purpose and so for centuries they have come to the
ptapuris and *Chaar Dhaams* seeking this elusive liberation.
ost of them have managed to visit one or two of the ten
thas in one lifetime but the dream has always been to visit
of them.

Visiting all the seven *Saptapuris* is not an easy thing to
hieve as the *tirthas* are spread across the Indian subcontinent.
ıshi, Ayodhya and Mathura are in the north in the Indo
ıngetic plains of Uttar Pradesh. Haridwar stands at the
othills of the Himalayas in Uttaranchal. Ujjain is in central
dia in Madhya Pradesh. Dwarka is in the west in the state
Gujarat and Kanchipuram is in the far south in Tamil Nadu.
The *Chaar Dhaams* span even longer distances. These sacred
odes of Vishnu are located in the North, South, East and
est, at the four cardinal points of the Indian subcontinent.
the pilgrim's trail to them virtually covers the whole
untry. In the North, the *dhaam* of Badrinath is nestled in a
lley high in the Himalayan mountain ranges of Uttaranchal.
the East is the *dhaam* of Puri by the Bay of Bengal in the
te of Orissa. In the West, the *dhaam* of Dwarka stands by
e Arabian Sea in Gujarat. Finally in the South,
meshwaram in Tamil Nadu is located on an island at the
uthern most point of the subcontinent, where the waters of
e Indian Ocean touch the land. So visiting the *Chaar Dhaam*
by far the most arduous journey that a pilgrim can undertake
d because of this, the *tirthayatra* is called the *Mahaparikrama*
the great circuit of the land.

There is a shorter circuit of four *dhaams* in the Himalayas that is also a *tirtha* popular with pilgrims. This is an easier pilgrimage that can be done in one trip into the hills above Haridwar and Rishikesh. These *dhaams* are of Kedarnath-Badrinath-Gangotri-Yamunotri, all of them located in the higher reaches of the hills in the state of Uttaranchal. However, unlike the *Chaar Dhaam*, all these *dhaams* are not dedicated to Vishnu and his *avatars*. Kedarnath has a Shiva temple by the banks of the Mandakini river. Badrinath has a Vishnu shrine and it stands by the Alakananda river. Yamunotri and Gangotri worship sacred rivers with temples dedicated to river goddesses. Gangotri is the place where the Ganga emerges from the Himalayan glacier and Yamunotri is at the spot where the Yamuna makes its appearance.

The most sacred *tirthas* since ancient times are these ten places of pilgrimage but in the present day the map of *tirthas* is a much larger one with an intricate maze of holy places spread across the land. There are *tirthas* of different sects like the Shaivas, Vaishnavas and the *peethasthana* of the Devi that total in hundreds. Also there are places sacred to local people that gather pilgrims from the region. Finally there are the *tirthas* around special occasions like the *melas*, or religious fairs, the largest and most famous being the great religious congregation of the Kumbh Melas that welcome pilgrims by the millions. The Kumbh Melas are held every twelve years at Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik and millions gather for the gigantic celebration.

Tirthas also have this quality of rising and declining in popularity. Newer *tirthas* gain more devotees because people begin to believe that these sacred places and temples have greater

wers to answer their prayers. Today Ujjain and Dwarka may t see as many pilgrims as later *tirthas* like Tirupati, Madurai Vaishno Devi that attract devotees by the millions. Still for e traditional pilgrim, the ten ancient *tirthas* of *Saptapuri* and *aar Dhaam* possess a unique spiritual resonance and his eam remains to visit these *tirthas* and gain the *darshan* of his loved deity while worshipping at His temples.

ne meaning of a pilgrimage

ne *Puranas* classify four kinds of *tirthas*. First are *Daiva tirthas*, e sacred places that have been touched by the presence of e trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and the Devi. Then there e *Asura tirthas*, these are the sites where the gods defeated mons, like Gaya where Shiva defeated an *asura* of that name. ne *Arsa tirthas* have been created through the great penances d austerities of sages. Finally there are the *Manusa tirthas* at have been sanctified by the presence of great solar and nar dynasties.

The most important reason for a *tirthayatra* is the *darshan* of deity. A *darshan* can be explained simply as the seeing or ewing of an image, but for a Hindu it is a much more complex perience. It is a deeply personal experience where the eyes e like the doorways to the soul. A *darshan* is being in the esence of a god or a great being and absorbing some of the ra of sanctity and goodness through this encounter. When Hindu stands with folded hands before an image or bends to uch the feet of a wise saint, he is reaching out to gather some this holiness. And for a *darshan* of a deity the pilgrim heads the temples, be it the Kashi Vishwanath to worship Shiva to the Varadaraja Temple to pray to Vishnu.

The religious rituals during a pilgrimage have remained unchanged for centuries. The temple is the *devalaya*, the palace of the god and the pilgrims arrive at the doorway often after a purifying bath in a river or a tank. They buy flowers, sweets, incense, vermilion and lamps from the temple market and then enter the temple barefoot. They walk silently through the outer halls towards the sanctum, concentrating their mind on the deity that waits for them in the *garbha griha*, resplendent in jewels and silks, decorated with flowers and wreathed in incense smoke. As the priest carries the pilgrim's offerings to the deity, they stand saying their prayers in a direct communion with their god. Then the offerings are returned to them consecrated as *prasad* that they carry home.

Pilgrims also attend the rituals and festivals at the temples. The rituals of *puja* begin at dawn with the waking of the deity and go on till the evening *aarti*, the worship with lighted lamps. These rituals take on a special significance on sacred days like the full moons. The festivals celebrate the myths of the deity, like *Shivaratri*, when Shiva and Parvati were married or the *Brahmotsavams*, when the chariots come out in procession from the temples. As pilgrims crowd a temple town during a festival there is the ambience of a carnival with processions weaving their way through busy markets, music and dance performances and fireworks sparkling across a dark night sky.

In ancient times pilgrims had to be a tough, adventurous breed. The roads were rough and physically demanding, there was the danger of robbers, bad food and disease. Some of the journeys took months — for instance the *haj* meant a voyage by sea and then a long trek across the Saudi desert. Hindus going to Mount Kailash and the Mansarovar Lake had to

imb remote Himalayan mountains, traverse treacherous aciers, face rain, cold, lack of food, altitude sickness and ostbite to achieve their dreams.

When on a pilgrimage the pilgrim is like a sadhu, andering faraway from home, with few possessions and ving the spartan life of the road. In the *Aitareya Brahmana*, e god Indra, protector of travellers, recommends the life of pilgrim to a young man named Rohita,

> "There is no happiness for him who does not travel Rohita!
> Thus we have heard. Living in the society of men, the best of men becomes a sinner. Therefore, wander!
> The feet of the wanderer are like the flower, his soul is growing and reaping the fruit; and all his sins are destroyed by his fatigues in wandering. Therefore, wander!
> The fortune of him who is sitting, sits; it rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps; it moves when he moves. Therefore wander!"

Unlike most of the saffron clad men on the roads of India no are vagrants in the guise of mendicants, the true *sannyasin* ten chooses to meditate in remote places like the Himalayas deep in forests. These *sadhus* are by far the hardiest and the ost committed of all pilgrims. These dedicated ascetics often e from busy temple towns and one sees them meditating at aces no one will venture into, as for these reclusive men, ligion is a personal search for enlightenment. However it is unfortunate fact that many of the *sadhus* and priests to be

seen at *tirthas* treat organised religion merely as a source of livelihood. For them religion is business and the pilgrim is a customer who can be fleeced.

For the true seekers of truth and inner enlightenment, the isolation and physical demands of their existence are the challenges of their search. One can see these matted haired, ash smeared ascetics living in remote caves perched precariously by the edge of cliffs, in the deepest forests or bathing in the icy waters flowing out of a glacier, at dawn. No one knows how they survive or what they are seeking. These enigmas of the spiritual world choose to remain a mystery in their psychic pilgrimage within their minds.

Pilgrims have also been the earliest travel writers in history. When pilgrims chronicle their experiences, their voices speak to us across the centuries. Their simple observations open a window to a long vanished world. The two Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien who came in the 5th century during the reign of Chandragupta II and Hiuen Tsang who travelled through India in the 7th century during the reign of Harsha, came to visit the sacred sites of Buddhism. Today their writings are an invaluable record of the history of the time and the lives of the people.

The most famous Hindu pilgrim was of course the amazingly peripatetic Shankaracharya. He began his journey in Kerala in the remote south and his travels covered just about every important *tirtha* in the land. Born in 788 AD, this philosopher-theologian played a vigorous role in the revival of Hinduism and he was responsible for once again making it the dominant faith of the land.

Little is known of his life except that he was born in Kerala and began his journey of discovery as a teenager. He was a

devotee of Shiva and belonged to the Mimamsa school of Vedic rituals. He was the founder and principal exponent of the doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta*, that propounded pure non-dualism. He died at the young age of thirty-two and would gain *moksha* at the other end of the land in Kedarnath. During a very short life he managed to organise and renew Hinduism by establishing his four monastic orders called *mathas* at the *Chaar Dhaams*.

These Shankaracharya *mathas* at the *chaar dhaam* are the Jyotirmath at Badrinath, the Sharada Math at Dwarka, the Goverdhan Math at Puri and the fourth is the Kamakoti Peetham at Kanchipuram, that is now located at Kumbakonam. Even today these Shankaracharya *peethas* continue to be centres of Sanskrit scholarship and Hindu philosophy.

Once, *tirthasthanas* were the university towns of ancient India—centres of teaching and scholarship where philosophers, theologians, grammarians, even astronomers and mathematicians lived and worked. There was a tradition of great preachers and thinkers moving from *tirtha* to *tirtha* meeting other scholars and gathering disciples. After he attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, Gautama Buddha travelled to Kashi where he debated his beliefs with the scholars of the city. Later his presence is recorded in many *tirthas* like Ayodhya and Mathura, where he would spend the monsoon retreats at the monasteries. Shankaracharya also went to Kashi to debate with Hindu and Buddhist scholars and his knowledge of every school of thought and his debating skills were legendary. Guru Nanak visited Haridwar, Puri and even ventured into Mecca. At the Jagannatha Temple, Nanak

composed an exquisite hymn in which he offered the world to God. His *aarti thali* was the sky itself and on it he placed the sun and stars as lamps.

SACRED PLACES

There are hundreds of *tirthas* across the country but there are some that are considered the most sacred. Here we give a list of the most important places of pilgrimage for Hindus.

Saptapuri—Kashi (Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh), Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), Mayapuri (Haridwar, Uttaranchal)), Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), Avantika (Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh), Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), Dwaravati (Dwarka, Gujarat).

***Chaar Dhaam* of Vishnu**—Badrinath (Uttaranchal), Puri (Orissa), Dwarka (Gujarat), Rameshwaram (Tamil Nadu).

***Chaar Dhaam* in the Himalayas**—Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri (all in Uttaranchal).

Jyotirlingams—Kedarnath (Uttaranchal), Vishveshwara (Varanasi), Vaidyanatha (Bihar), Mahakaleshwar (Ujjain), Omkareshwar (Indore), Nageshwar (Dwarka), Somnath (Gujarat), Triyambakeshwar (Maharashtra), Grishneshwar (Aurangabad), Bhimashankar (Maharashtra), Mallikarjuna (Tamil Nadu), Rameshwaram (Tamil Nadu).

Sacred shivalingams of the five elements—Ekambaranatha Temple, Kanchipuram (earth), Jambukeshwar Temple, Srirangam (water), Tiruvannamalai Temple (fire), Kalahasti Temple (air), Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram (ether).

acred rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Kaveri, Narmada, Sindhu.

our streams of the Ganga—Alakananda, Bhagirathi, Mandakini, Yamuna.

laces of pilgrimage on the Ganga—Devaprayag, udraprayag, Karnaprayag, Nandprayag, Vishnuprayag, ishikesh, Haridwar, Varanasi, Allahabad, Gangasagar.

Sometimes a very sacred place of pilgrimage is also called *dhaam* to signify its great sanctity. For instance pilgrims visit our *tirthas* in the Himalayas which are also called the *Chaar Dhaam*. These are Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. These *tirthas* are not exclusive to Vishnu as Kedarnath has a temple dedicated to Shiva and Gangotri and Yamunotri are located where the rivers Ganga and Yamuna appear in the Himalayan glaciers. Traditionally many other *irthas* have also been called *dhaams*, like the Brahma Temple nd lakes at Pushkar in Rajasthan. However, for the devout Hindu, the most scared and ancient of the *dhaams* remain the *haar Dhaam* of Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri and Rameshwaram.

Sometimes a pilgrimage is a spiritual journey, a *yatra*. It is ften undertaken as a vow and pilgrims trek for miles over rduous terrain, perilous hill tracks or sandy deserts to reach emote shrines like Amarnath or Sabarimala. They rcumambulate sacred hills like Kailash and Arunachala, athe in the icy lakes like Mansarovar and walk for five days siting 108 shrines in the *Panchkroshi Yatra* of Kashi. For them ne physical challenges of the *yatra* make their spiritual tisfaction deeper.

Some fairs are sacred and a pilgrimage can be a mela. The greatest of all melas is the gigantic congregation of the Kumbh Mela where pilgrims arrive in millions and face great hardships for that joy of bathing in the sacred river at an auspicious moment. Every twelve years, the four *tirthas* of Prayag (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik come alive for the Kumbh Melas. It is a spectacular panorama of saffron clad, ash smeared sadhus, villagers in turbans or veils carrying their possessions in dusty bundles, city people in track suits and carrying cell phones, young and old answering the call of an ancient myth of a pot of ambrosia being carried by Vishnu. At the Kumbh Melas the poor often arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs and are provided with food and shelter in a gigantic enterprise of charity that is unrivalled in the world.

Pilgrims through the ages

Pilgrims are the world's first tourists. For centuries they have undertaken long, and at times dangerous journeys, to pray at sacred shrines. All the great pilgrimages — the *haj* to Mecca, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Jerusalem and the Hindu journey to the *puris* and *dhaams* have been the route for millions of nameless, forgotten pilgrims. However some of them took the trouble to chronicle their experiences and these pilgrim journals are an invaluable record for historians.

Often there are more personal reasons for a pilgrimage. Pilgrims come to pray and ask for the help of a deity during a crisis and then if their prayers are answered they come again as an act of thanksgiving. This is especially true of temples that have gained a reputation for being generous with their

essings. People go by the thousands to Tirupati or make the emanding trek up a hill to Sabarimala and Vaishno Devi to k for help or to thank the deity for prayers answered.

A pilgrimage can also be an act of penance for sins ommitted. Often in the waning years of their lives, penance, onement and prayers for *moksha* bring pilgrims to a *tirtha*. ilgrims bathe in the Ganga at Kashi and Haridwar with the elief that the holy waters of the river will wash away their ns. However just a ritual dip in the river does not free those ho do not lead moral lives. In Hindu belief one is responsible r one's actions and one has to always answer for sins ommitted deliberately in this birth and the next, as that is our *rma*. Not just ordinary people but even kings have gone on lgrimage to atone for their sins. Rama went to perform a *jna* sacrifice at Haridwar as penance for killing Ravana who as a brahmin. The Pandava brothers wandered from *tirtha* to *rtha* after the battle of Kurukshetra.

Every landmark in a person's life is commemorated at a *rtha*. Parents bring their newborn children to seek the essings of the deity and name their child in the *naamkaran* eremony. Young boys sit on the *ghats* of Varanasi and Ujjain etting their heads shaven before the sacred thread ceremony *upanayana*. Newly weds carry flowers to the temples and e rivers and at some shrines, like the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai the marriage itself is performed in the temple *andapas*. Finally when life ends, the *shraadh* or funeral rites e performed beside the river by sorrowful families. Here ncestors are also worshipped with the *pindadaan* ceremony.

CHAPTER TWO

Vishnu and His Dhaams

"O thou best of the Bharata race, sojourns in tirthas which are meritorious and which constitute one of the high mysteries of the Rishis, are even superior to sacrifices."

— the *Mahabharata*.

The *Chaar Dhaams* are called the sacred abodes of Vishnu and the main deity worshipped in these four *tirthas* is Vishnu or one of his *avatars*. Vishnu himself is worshipped in Badrinath. In Dwarka he is worshipped in his *avatar* of Lord Krishna, king of ancient Dwaravati, the hero of the *Mahabharata* and the philosopher who spoke the verses of the Bhagavat Gita. In Puri the main deity is of Vishnu as Jagannatha, the lord of the world, with his unusual icon worshipped with the images of Balabhadra and Subhadra. Finally in Rameshwaram, it is Vishnu's seventh *avatar*, Lord Rama, the king of Ayodhya and the hero of the epic *Ramayana*, who receives the prayers of the devotees.

Vishnu is a solar god and as the second god of the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, he plays the role of the great eserver. In today's Hinduism the worshippers of Vishnu and s ten *avatars* are by far the most popular sects, with temples every village and town of the land. In the Hindu pantheon, shnu is probably the most benign among all the deities and cause of his compassionate character, deeply loved by ople. He is a benevolent, caring god who listens to your ayers, understands your dilemmas, forgives your sins and fers salvation and mercy. His worship has a joyful, tender d loving character, with devotees swaying to songs and even ncing during *puja* and making offerings of flowers, incense d food. As the sage Bhrigu wrote, "Here is the greatest of e gods. He surpasses others by the most powerful of all eapons — kindness and generosity".

Vishnu is ever ready to intervene on behalf of righteousness d come to the assistance of those who ask for help. Among e trinity, he has the most human face. Brahma as the lord of eation is a remote deity who withdraws from the world once s work is done, staying detached from the daily lives of people. iva is the lord of destruction, who is capable of the ssolution of the world, and he is both loved and feared. Even ough he is often generous and loving, he is also a volatile god th a vengeful and angry face. Vishnu is not that easy to anger, ile he is much more forgiving and only a pure adoration is quired from his devotees. As the Tamil poet Tirumalisai wrote ound the 6th century AD,

"When the grooves of the senses are barred and sealed,

When the highway of knowledge is lit with
wisdom's lamp,
When intense pity melts the heart and eases the
bones,
Then only can Vishnu, the wielder of the sacred
disc be seen."

Vishnu's rise to eminence is one of the most intriguing stories of Hindu mythology. In the *Rigveda*, (1200 – 900 BC) the first sacred text of the Hindus, Vishnu is merely one of the lesser aspects of the sun god Surya and only five hymns are dedicated to him. He is one of the twelve *Adityas* and is merely the manifestation of solar energy that follows *Surya* as the sun god travels across the sky every day. The only myth about him in the *Rigveda* is rather a simple tale of Vishnu covering the seven regions of the universe in three giant steps. From this unobtrusive beginning, he would evolve into this many-hued complex god whose manifestations needed at least ten incarnations or *avatars*. Among these *avatars* are the two most popular deities of Hinduism — the hero-warrior-kings, Rama and Krishna. As Krishna described himself in the *Bhagavad Gita*, beautifully capturing his intricately imagined character,

"I am the Brihat songs of all songs in the Vedas
I am the Gayatri of all measures in verse.
Of months, I am the first of the year,
And of the seasons, the season of flowers.

I am the cleverness in the gambler's dice.
I am the beauty of all things beautiful.

I am victory and the struggle for victory.
I am the goodness of those who are good."

The Rigvedic Vishnu represents the sun's disc and every
anifestation of light — in the sun, in the fire and in lightning.
is the rising sun, the sun at high noon and at the setting.
times he is described as one of the companions of Indra,
king of the gods. In some of the hymns he is described as
oving in Indra's entourage with the Maruts, the gods of
rms, as Indra rides out to war against Vrittra, the demon
drought. His only connection with the later Vishnu, the god
t is to be found in the *Puranas* (400 – 700 AD) and the epics
00 BC – 200 AD), is a vague reference as "the unconquerable
eserver". In the epics he is not only the great preserver of
ery aspect of the universe including the sun, but the *Puranas*
en call him the creator, thus usurping the role of Brahma.
Vishnu's mythology is given in the greatest detail in the
hnu, *Vayu* and the *Bhagavat Puranas* and the story of his two
ost important *avatars*, Rama and Krishna are given in the two
eat epics. The history of Ramachandra of Ayodhya is told
the *Ramayana*. The exploits of Krishna of Mathura and
varka are found in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Harivamsa*,
hich is a supplement of the epic. The *Mahabharata* also
ntains the *Bhagavat Gita*, which is by far the most important
igious text in Hinduism and contains the teachings of
ishna about the correct path of life and the attainment of
vation.

In the *Puranas*, especially the *Vishnu Purana*, Vishnu is the
ine monarch, ever at work for the salvation of mankind, the
fect being who embodies all the *satvagunas*, the qualities of

goodness and mercy that are the characteristics of the preserver. As this divine preserver he is called *Narayana* and is depicted as floating on the celestial waters of the *Ananta* ocean, lying on the coils of the seven-headed serpent called Sheshanag. Ever smiling, Vishnu always has this quality of calm and repose, a compassionate detachment that contrasts widely with the warm hearted but quick-tempered and unpredictable Shiva.

The most interesting element of the myths of Vishnu is his many incarnations called *avatars*. An *avatar* means a descent and in Hindu mythology it symbolises an incarnation, as a portion of the divine essence of Vishnu takes another form with superhuman powers. Krishna who, in the discourse of the *Bhagavat Gita*, explains the need for the *avatars*. Krishna explains that when the world is filled with iniquities Vishnu appears in a living form to save the good and destroy evil. As Krishna says to Arjuna at the battle field of Kurukshetra,

> "Whenever righteousness declines, O Bharata
> And unrighteousness holds sway;
> Then do I manifest myself in bodily form
> To protect the good, to destroy the evil
> To firmly establish *dharma*, the rule of
> righteousness
> I come into being from age to age."

The story of all his ten *avatars* from the man-lion Narasimha to Krishna have this common thread of good triumphing over evil with the intervention of a celestial aspect of Vishnu. When he is a warlike god, he kills demons like Hiranyakasipu, Hiranyaksha, Namichi and Kalnemi.

The worshippers of Vishnu are called *Vaishnavas* and ıong the greatest *Vaishnava* saints have been Chaitanya, manuja and the *Alvar* poets of the south like Nammalvar, yalvar and the mystic poetess Andal. The *Vaishnava* sect rose popularity from the 4th century AD and the first mention the *Bhakti* of Vasudeva-Krishna can be found in the treatise *htadhyayi* written by the philosopher Panini in the 5th ıtury. The sect flourished with the patronage of the Gupta ıgs and King Chandragupta Vikramaditya called himself a *rama bhagavat* — a worshipper of Vishnu. He adopted the blem of the *Garuda Dhwaja* — his flag had the image of shnu's vehicle, the mythical bird named Garuda. The Gupta riod is the time when temples to Vishnu began to be built d a definite iconography developed with many images of shnu being carved at Mathura.

Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi or Sri, make a very ractive divine couple. She is the beautiful and gentle goddess wealth and he is the benign preserver of creation. Lakshmi's ra dazzles like lightning and from her body emanates the grance of lotuses. They live in his heaven called Vaikuntha d his vehicle is the mythical half-human, half-bird Garuda, ıose image is also placed on the god's ensign called the *ruda Dhwaja*.

In his icons Vishnu is depicted as a king, clad in silks and vels often flanked by Lakshmi and Bhumi, the earth ddess. He is a very handsome god with perfect features and miling, benign expression. He has a deep blue skin and ars yellow gold garments, a garland of lotuses and much vellery — bangles, earrings, necklaces and a crown. On his ast he has a peculiar curl of hair called *Srivatsa*, he wears

the famous *Syamantaka* jewel on his wrist and the *Kaustabha* gem on his chest.

Vishnu's image is called Sri Vigraha and it has four hands and carries the *shankha-chakra-gada-padma* — a conch shell, a discus, a mace and a lotus. The conch shell is the famous *Panchajanaya* that he blows at the beginning of a battle. The discus is called *Sudarshana Chakra* and also *Vajranabha* that he uses to vanquish the enemy. The mace is called *Kaumodaki* and the lotus is of course the *padma*. He is depicted in three postures — *Sthanaka*, that is standing; *Asana*, seated on a lotus with Lakshmi beside him and *Sayana*, reclining on the coils of the *Sheshanag*, floating on the *Ananta* Ocean, with the serpent's seven great hoods flaring out protectively over his head. In the *Sayana* icon sometimes a lotus grows out of his navel and Brahma is shown sitting on it.

Vishnu's iconography is one of the most detailed, where every element is named and some, like the *Sudarshana Chakra*, are even worshipped on their own. In spite of his benign appearance Vishnu is also a warrior and apart from his mace, he has a bow, the *Saranga* and a sword, the *Nandaka*. His *avatars* Parashuram, Ramachandra and Krishna are all warriors.

Like Shiva has the symbol of the *lingam*, the stone symbol of Vishnu is the *Salagram*. These round stones that have been smoothened by the River Gandaki are worshipped as a substitute for the image of Vishnu. His favourite flower is the lotus and he likes the *Tulsi* plant, the *vata* or banyan and the *pipal* trees, that are all worshipped by Vaishnavas. Some of the greatest temples of Vishnu are at Srirangam, Badrinath, Kanchipuram, Guruvayur and Tirupati.

Vishnu may have ten incarnations but finally every aspect
avatar of Vishnu is the same eternal god. As Krishna
escribes himself in the Bhagavat Gita,

"In essence I am never born,
As I never alter.
I am the lord of all beings.
And the full master of my own nature.
Yet of my own power I come to be."

Unlike Shiva who lives like an ascetic in the hills, Vishnu's
eaven is luxurious and opulent deserving of a divine
onarch. The *Mahabharata* describes Vishnu's abode
aikuntha as being made entirely of gold, with pillars made
precious gems. The crystal Ganga flows through it and there
e five pools with blue, red and white lotuses blooming in
em. He sits on a throne that glows golden as the meridian
n. At times a resplendent Vishnu is depicted with Lakshmi
his right, seated on white lotuses.

From the time of the *Puranas*, Vishnu has remained one
the most important gods of the Hindu pantheon. As
holars studying the rise of this god have noticed, his growth
mes from the ability to absorb the qualities of other deities,
cal cults and even the legends of heroes and great thinkers.
his mythology is a fusion of not just gods but also the
story of great kings and seers. First he took on the role of
e creator from Brahma and then he eclipsed Indra as a divine
onarch. Later the legends of great kings like Ramachandra
Ayodhya and Krishna of Dwarka were incorporated into
s myths when they were included as *avatars*. Finally great
ges like Narayana were deified and became aspects of

Vishnu. For instance, some scholars speculate that the teachings of the Bhagavat Gita were the works of the great sages of the time.

While reading the myths of various gods and goddesses in the *Puranas* what is fascinating is the underlying conflict between the worshippers of Vishnu and Shiva. The epic-Puranic times, between the 3rd and 5th century AD, must have been a period of fierce conflict for supremacy between the two largest sects of the land and the thirteenth book of the *Mahabharata* is positively fraught with sectarian strife between *Vaishnavas* and *Shaivites*. Every *Purana* tries to prove the supremacy of one of the deities and there are innumerable myths that talk of one vanquishing the other. If Shiva triumphs by a show of his great yogic powers, Vishnu's successes come from a more subtle cleverness and a diplomatic demeanour. If the *Skanda Purana* tells the myth of the *Jyotirlingam* in which Shiva is shown to be supreme, the *Bhagavat Purana* tells of the myth of Bhrigu in which Vishnu is hailed as the greatest of the gods.

The *Bhagavat Purana* story begins with an argument among the sages about who is the supreme god — Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva. Rishi Bhrigu is then sent to heaven to test the trinity and discover who is the greatest. He first visits Brahma and entering Brahma's court he does not greet the god with the correct rituals of obeisance. A furious Brahma is about to curse him when Bhrigu saves himself by quickly apologising. Then he travels to Mount Kailash and when Shiva comes up to greet him with a welcoming embrace, he turns away rudely. The volatile god promptly loses his temper and picks up his trident to kill him. Bhrigu is saved only because Parvati falls at her husband's feet and calms him down.

Finally Bhrigu arrives at Vaikuntha. He finds Vishnu asleep nd kicks him on his chest to wake him. Vishnu springs, up vith a smile and welcomes the sage with kind words. He nvites Bhrigu to sit down politely asks if he had hurt his foot vhen he kicked him and begins to message it. Deeply shamed, a repentant Bhrigu is left speechless by such kindness nd his eyes fill with tears of devotion. He hastens back to arth to tell the other *rishis* that it was Vishnu who was the reatest of the gods. Diplomatic and clever, Vishnu is often hown triumphing by the use of his quick wit and a sense of umour and this quality is most evident in his Krishna *avatar*. Among all his *avatars* it is Krishna who is considered to be the omplete embodiment of all the qualities of the god.

Vishnu became one of the pre-eminent gods, even eclipsing Brahma, mainly because of his *avatars*. Vishnu and his ten *avatars* vithin themselves encompass just about every quality that makes god popular. He is kind and compassionate, a god who has the atience to listen to his devotees' prayers. At the same time he s always willing to fight for good and vanquish evil. His *avatars* pan every stage of human existence, Krishna is a mischievous hild, an ardent lover, an astute statesman and finally a majestic ing. Rama is dutiful, just, the ideal monarch and the ideal uman being. There are the ferocious Narasimha and the engeful Parashuram to tackle the demons and the cruel kings.

The *avatars* are believed to be ten in number but the *Bhagavat Purana* lists up to twenty two *avatars* and also states that in fact he incarnations of Vishnu cannot be counted as they are as umerable as the rivulets flowing out of a lake. The ten most ommonly accepted *avatars* are the following: 1) *Matsya*, the sh. 2) *Kurma*, the tortoise. 3) *Varaha*, the boar. 4) *Narasimha*,

the man-lion. 5) *Vamana*, the dwarf. 6) *Parashuram*, Rama with the axe. 7) *Ramachandra*, the king of Ayodhya and the hero of the *Ramayana*. 8) *Krishna*, the king of Mathura and Dwarka. 9) *Gautama Buddha*, the founder of Buddhism and 10) *Kalki*, the *avatar* who is yet to come.

The first five incarnations are purely mythological and not human. Interestingly, the original myths of *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha* and *Vamana* were first credited to Brahma-Prajapati in the *Satapatha Brahmana*. But the next four, of Parashuram, Rama, Krishna and the Buddha show the deification of great kings, heroes and an influential teacher. The ninth *avatar* of the Buddha is the most confusing as some list Krishna's older brother Balarama as an *avatar* instead of the Buddha. There are three Ramas mentioned as *avatars* — Rama Bhargava who is Parashuram, Rama Dasarathi, the prince of Ayodhya and Rama Haladhara, that is Balarama who carries a plough as his weapon.

The inclusion of Gautama Buddha among the *avatars* of Vishnu has always intrigued scholars, as his teachings rejected the rituals of Hinduism and opposed the supremacy of the brahmin priesthood. During the years of the rise of Buddhism when the ancient Brahmanical religion was on the decline, this was probably an attempt by the priesthood to combat Buddhism by introducing the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon. Buddha began as a teacher but was gradually transformed into a god. By the time of the evolution of Mahayana Buddhism he was considered a solar deity and that made it even easier to absorb him as an *avatar*. However, even though he is listed as an *avatar*, the Buddha was never worshipped by Hindus and no temples were built to him.

The concept of *avatar* was always a very amorphous one. Many of the writers and poets of ancient times created their own lists, praising gods, kings and sages they liked as *avatars*. Among the selections are *Purusha*, the primal man; *rishis* like Kapila, Narada, Dattatreya and Veda Vyasa and kings like Prithu and Rishabha. And even *Yajna*, the sacrifice itself, Nara-Narayan, the two aspects of Krishna and Arjuna, and Dhanvantri, the physician of the gods managed to gain the status of *avatars*. In modern times the kings of Nepal are considered to be the *avatars* of Vishnu.

Both Shiva and Vishnu and his *avatars* were the inspiration for the greatest surge in devotional poetry in India. This stream of passionate devotion to a god began to be known as *Bhakti* and it led to the composition of some of the most beautiful poetry from ancient to medieval times. From Nammalvar to Jaideva and Mira Bai, this poetry has been at the heart of the Hindu worship or *puja*, where there is a personal communion with God through rituals performed by the devotee and the singing of hymns.

The songs of the *Alvars* who wrote in praise of Vishnu and the *Nayanmars* who worshipped Shiva through verse, are still sung in the temples of the South. The *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, the poems of Surdas and Mira Bai have become part of the spiritual heritage of the people. In North India the *Ramcharitmanas* has become the scripture of the common people, who read and recite its verses daily.

Among the greatest Vaishnava teachers and saints are Ramanujacharya who founded the Srisampradaya sect in the 11th century. The most important centre of his sect is the Vishnu temple at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu. The sage

Madhavacharya lived and taught in the 13th century. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who sang and danced in praise of Krishna, was born in Bengal in the 15th century and established the sect of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas and is considered one of the greatest Bhakti saints.

Vishnu has a thousand names and the recitation of his Sahasranama is considered a very meritorious act of devotion. Among his names is Achyuta, the imperishable; Ananta, the endless and Chaturbhuja, the four armed. He is Hrishikesha, the lord of the senses; Janardhana, the one men worship and Purushottama, the ideal and supreme spirit. He is the handsome and long-haired Kesava and the king-like Kiriti, wearing a crown. He is Varadaraja, the giver of boons and Lakshmipati, consort of Lakshmi.

As he floats on the celestial waters, Vishnu is Narayana and because of the lotus that grows out of his navel, he is Padmanabha. His golden yellow garments give him the name of Pitambara. He is Madhav, made of honey or a descendent of Madhu; Hari, the saviour and Mukunda, the deliverer. He is also Yajneshwara, the lord of the sacrifice and at a *yajna* he is the priest, the oblation, the hymn and the sacrifice itself. As Nara Narayana he is paired with a deified human being, like Rama and Lakshman, Krishna and Balarama and Krishna and Arjuna.

Vishnu's *Chaar Dhaam*

It is said that the four *dhaams* are the favourite abodes of Vishnu on earth. The divine monarch bathes in the Alakananda River at Badrinath. He gets dressed at Dwarka. He eats a meal at Puri and then goes to Rameshwaram for a

well earned rest after his arduous work of preserving all creation.

The four *tirthas* of the *Chaar Dhaam* are set at the cardinal points of the Indian subcontinent. In the North, the *dhaam* of Badrinath is in the Himalayas; in the West, Dwarka stands by the Arabian Sea; in the East is Puri by the Bay of Bengal and in the South, Rameshwaram is an island at the point where the Indian Ocean touches the Indian shore. All four have temples dedicated either to Vishnu or to one of his *avatars*. Badrinath is a Vishnu temple, Dwarka worships Krishna, Puri is the *tirtha* of Krishna as Jagannatha and Rameshwaram has temples dedicated to Rama.

The sage Adi Shankaracharya established monasteries , the *mathas*, at some of these *dhaams*. These are the Jyotirmath near Badrinath, the Sharada *math* at Dwarka and the Goverdhan math at Puri. His fourth *matha*, the Kamakoti Peetham, was established at Kanchipuram.

CHAPTER THREE

A Palace for the Gods

"Just as certain limbs of the body are purer than others, so are certain places on earth more sacred — some on account of their situation, others because of their sparkling waters, and others because of the association or habitation of saintly people."

— the *Mahabharata*

At the heart of the *tirthas* of the *Chaar Dhaam* are four majestic temples that have drawn the pilgrims to their doorsteps for centuries. These temples are at the core of all the rituals of *puja* and *darshan* because in their sanctum stands the majestic, compassionate deity who listens to a devotee's prayers.

At Badrinath there is the great Badrinarayan Temple of Vishnu. In Dwarka stands the many-tiered Dwarkadheesh Temple dedicated to Krishna, the eighth *avatar* of Vishnu, worshipped as the lord of Dwarka. At Puri is the legendary Jagannatha Temple of Krishna as the lord of the world, a temple that has amazed visitors with its elaborate rituals and

colourful *Ratha Yatra* procession. Finally in Rameshwaram stands the Ramanathaswamy Temple dedicated to Rama, the seventh *avatar* of Vishnu, that is one of the jewels of Dravidian temple architecture.

For a Hindu, a temple is a *devalaya*, the palace of their god. Here, within its inner sanctum, they place the icon that is the earthly symbol of the deity. And to this image they carry their prayers in handfuls of flowers and lovingly perform the rituals of worship with incense and lamps. To their god they bring their hopes and fears, they visit him to share their happiness and sorrow, and they believe that if you come with pure intentions, God hears what is in your heart.

Hindus have a surprisingly personal equation with their god, who is feared and propitiated but also cared for and loved. The deity is washed and given food, music and dance is performed for its entertainment and it is taken out for chariot rides. The gods have consorts, they have their favourite vehicles, trees, fruits and flowers. For a Hindu the temple is much more than a place of worship, where you ring the bells and chant the *mantras*. It is also a place where great minds gather to share their wisdom and it is a joyous centre of festivities.

Hinduism is a constantly evolving set of beliefs and it is more than a religion with moral precepts. It is a way of living. Its ability to evolve and accept new thoughts and its innate spirit of tolerance is what has helped it to survive the onslaught of more rigid faiths like Islam and Christianity. The cheerful bustle of life in the temples, full of chatter, song and the laughter of children capture its life enhancing character.

In ancient times kings built their palaces in perishable wood and brick but the temples were built in stone. And it is these

temples that have survived as living records of great kings and famous dynasties. We know the history of kings like Narasimha Deva of Orissa, Raja Raja Chola of Thanjavur and Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagar because of the inscriptions on the temples they built. We have discovered forgotten dynasties like the Pallavas and the Cholas because of their temples. These stone monuments have stood the test of time, survived the onslaught of a cruel climate, the avarice of invaders and the bigotry of kings. They are our history and our heritage, a vibrant kaleidoscope of sculpture, painting, music and dance. The *devalayas* are not just for the Hindus, they are for every Indian.

When temples began to be built in the early years of the first millenium of the Christian era, they quickly became the centre of urban civilisation in India. A temple was always placed in the heart of a human settlement and a town would grow all around it. The main roads would lead off from the temple gateways and the largest markets would spring up along these roads. The temple would always be the tallest structure in the town, with its soaring spires reaching up to the sky and it would gather pilgrims and scholars, craftsmen and musicians within its walls. Even today, in temple towns like Madurai or Varanasi, it is the spires of the temples that dominate the skyline of the city.

What is amazing at these temples is the unbroken religious tradition they have preserved for over a thousand years. As the bells ring, the priest raises the many flamed *aarti* lamp to illuminate the face of the idol and voices rise to the chant of *mantras*, what you experience is a continuing tradition that goes back to the days of Vedic sages singing a hymn to the sun

god Surya. Our temples are the living proof of the immense and venerable age of India's civilisation and its remarkable power of survival. The temples of Luxor and Babylon stand empty and silent but in Varanasi and Madurai the walls still echo to the same prayers.

A conversation with God

The Hindu way of worship is a personal communion with god, we do not have any tradition of congregational worship. Even when a crowd gathers around the inner sanctum to watch the priests perform the rituals of *puja*, each one prays on his own. This is a very personal faith, there is rarely any mass chanting of prayers or temple sermons, except the singing of *bhajans*, collectively.

The Hindu holds conversations with god like they would with a spiritual guide, a family member or friend. There is Baba Vishwanath, the benign father in Kashi and Ma Durga, the understanding mother in Bengal and generous Ganesh, the benevolent godfather whose shrine finds a place in every Hindu home. The deities will listen to your prayers, share your happiness and also accept your anger with a stoic patience. For a pious Hindu going to the temple is not essential, you can pray at home at your personal shrine and worship by doing the *puja* without using the services of a priest.

A visit to a temple is a spiritual journey that needs a preparation of the mind and the body. The ritual of the *puja* is called *manastirtha*, a 'pilgrimage of the mind' whose 'deep clean water is truth'. You get up at dawn, bathe, wear fresh clothes and still fasting, walk to the temple. Then buying the offerings of flowers, vermilion, incense and sweets from the

shops at the gateways, you enter the precinct of the temple. Leaving your shoes outside, you walk barefoot up the flight of stairs, through the corridors, the various pillared halls to the other end of the precinct where the small inner sanctum is placed. This long walk, usually in silence, is the time when the mind is emptied of all stray thoughts and concentrated on prayers.

There are specific rituals that you follow at each temple. At the Shiva temple you offer prayers at the figure of the Nandi bull, that stands at the main doorway. A temple to a goddess may have a holy tree, another a sacred pillar. A Vishnu temple will have a figure of his vehicle Garuda. There are smaller shrines to minor gods and goddesses around the sanctum and you worship them all with a few flower petals, a dot of sandalwood paste or vermilion. Then you circle the sanctum clockwise, doing the *pradakshina*.

Finally you reach the doorway of the sanctum, inside the deity stands in a dark, starkly simple room, lit by flickering oil lamps. The priest who stands at the door will carry your offerings inside as you reach up and ring the bells at the door to catch the attention of a busy god. The priest will touch the flowers to the deity's feet, light the incense and wave it before the god and then the offerings are returned to you as *prasada* — consecrated by the acceptance of the god. During this *puja* the communion is directly between the worshipper and the worshipped, the experience unique to each devotee.

The more formal rituals of *puja* that are performed by the brahmin priests of the temple are like the consecration of a monarch. The deity is the king of all kings, the temple is his palace and the image is often placed on a throne, the *simhasan*,

the lion's seat. It is bathed in perfumed water and then anointed with sandalwood paste, dressed in gorgeous garments and adorned with jewels. Vishnu may wear a crown of gold, Meenakshi will have diamonds glittering at her throat and ears but the ascetic Shiva is usually quite happy with a simple garland of fresh, green, *bilva* leaves.

The ceremony of the *puja* follows a specific order. Beginning at dawn, the *puja* is performed many times during the day and the most auspicious *pujas* are the dawn, noon and dusk *puja*. The deity is offered fragrant sandalwood paste, flowers and incense. Then as fans and fly whisks are waved, burning camphor purifies the air and then the cleansing fire is offered as the many flamed *aarti* lamp is raised to illuminate the face of the deity, so that the devotees can see it clearly. Finally fruits and sweets, even cooked dishes are offered. The burning camphor and the *aarti* lamp is carried outside and devotees reach out to feel the heat with their right palm and touch their heads to gather the blessings. The holy water is sprinkled over their bent heads as the priest intones "*Om Shanti!*" — peace be to all.

There are fifteen forms of *puja* and each ritual has a name. First the idol is offered a seat, *asana* and then formally welcomed, with the chant of the *swagata*. The feet are washed, often with *panchamrita*, a mixture of the five elements of milk, yoghurt, ghee, sugar and honey and this is later offered to the devotees. Water is offered in the ritual of *arghya* and it is sipped in the *achamana*. The deity is bathed, in the *snana* and dressed, with *vasana-bhushana* and a mirror held before it.

Then the rituals of welcome begin. Sandalwood paste, flowers, incense, camphor and fire in the *aarti* and finally the

food, called the *naivedya* is offered. Then there is a second offering of water for the deity to wash its mouth and all the while there is the recital of Vedic hymns and mantras, the ringing of bells and conches. The priest ends the ceremony with a final obeisance by lying prostate on the floor in the *namaskriya*.

Temples of culture

Temples have not only preserved the Hindu religion but through their patronage they have also kept alive India's cultural heritage. Temple towns like Madurai or Varanasi have always been great centres of scholarship. Here the gurus had *ashrams* and students came from all over the land to study at these colleges. At these *gurukuls* the students not only learnt the ancient Hindu texts from the Vedas to the Upanishads but also specialised in various fields like mathematics, logic, astronomy, grammar and medicine.

For centuries the Vedas were not written but taught through recitation by the gurus and memorised by students. As the Vedas were considered to be divine, great emphasis was laid on correct pronunciation, even when the meaning of the ancient Sanskrit text was obscure. If these ancient texts have survived nearly intact it is because of the dedication of countless scholars at these *gurukuls*.

The temples also became centres of the social life of a town. Spiritual leaders gave sermons in the halls of the temples, where dance and music recitals and big sacrificial ceremonies were also held. Temples fed people, ran schools and refuges for the poor and the priests were influential members of the community. Traditionally the deity had to be entertained, so

emples also welcomed musicians and dancers. All the classical ances from Bharatanatyam to Odissi have their origins in emples. Great poets received the patronage of temples. Among the greatest gifts of the temples of the south are the Tamil devotional poetry of the Nayanmars dedicated to Shiva nd the Alvar hymns that praise Vishnu and these hymns are till sung at the temples.

Important treatises on the systems of architecture and culpture like the Shilpa Shastra and Vastu Shastra were vritten because of the many temples being built by kings. Religious architecture became a symbol of power and kings uilt temples to gain *punya*, merit with the gods and also as nonuments of their greatness. Dynasties vied with each other o build more magnificent structures, to be patrons of great cholars and artists. They gathered the best craftsmen - culptures, architects and painters to build these temples. Then nvited great scholars, poets, musicians and dancers to become part of these great religious institutions.

The craftsmen working on a temple were called *silpin* and here were various kinds of *silpin*. The *sthapati* was the esigning architect; the *sutragrahin* was the surveyor; the *akshaka* was the sculptor and the *vardhakin* was the builder-lasterer-painter. They all worked under the supervision of the *thapaka*, the architect-priest who was usually a brahmin with nowledge of the *Vastu Shastra* as well as the practical crafts f architecture and sculpture.

Most of these great artists have remained nameless and ave been forgotten by later generations but their magnificent reations have stood for centuries. All the temples have randiose inscriptions that praise the king who has had these

temples built, but rarely do we find any mention of the talented *silpins* who actually built them with such devotion and covered the walls with carvings of such incomparable beauty.

Ancient Hindu temples, especially those that survived in the South were created as a form of sculpture and the finest work of these nameless artists can be seen on the walls, pillars and the towering *gopurams*. It is a magical, mythical, world of gods, goddesses, celestial nymphs, prancing horses, royal parades, demons and legendary heroes. The interiors were embellished with fresco paintings and the ceilings and walls glittered with murals in jewel-like colours. One of the greatest temple art traditions that has survived till the present is that of Chola bronzes; these are exquisite free-standing icons that were first presented to temples by the Chola kings.

Temple towns have always been great commercial centres. Take the silk weavers of Kashi and Kanchipuram, they were first employed by the temples to provide silk cloth for the deities and priests, as silk is considered the purest of textiles. Then sarees were woven for the *devadasis*. Today these two cities are leading producers of silk with a huge population of weavers. Big markets flourish at all temple towns to meet the requirements of pilgrims and provide a livelihood to the people. Important temples hold regular festivals like the *ratha yatras* when thousands arrive and it is also a time to shop and enjoy the pleasures of the city.

The canons of the *shastras*

Shastras are ancient treatises that laid down the rules of correct conduct and practice and they have codified many aspects of life from the rituals of worship to the layout of temples and

he principles of sculpture. The *Vastupurusha Mandala* lays down the sacred rules of architecture, especially of temples. The *Vastu Shastra* was written in the early years of the first millenium and copies of the treatise were widely circulated. Because of this, temples came to be built on the same pattern all across the Indian subcontinent.

The temple is considered a sacred space, a *mandala*, where every structure has a fixed place, a specific direction and purpose. For instance, most temples face east so that the first rays of the sun can illumine the deity. Often temples are built next to rivers because running water is needed for ritual ablutions. The *Vastu Shastra* gives detailed and very specific instructions on where entrances are to be made, the direction of the niches where images of deities can be placed, the position of windows, gateways, roof beams and towers. It is finally a practical architectural code that is couched in esoteric religious terms.

A temple is conceived as a symbol of heaven. The heaven of the Hindus — *swarga* is said to be located around a mythical mountain named Meru in the Himalayas. The pantheon of gods and goddesses, the *apsaras* who are celestial dancers, demi gods like the *yakshas* and *yakshis*, celestial musicians called *gandharvas*, all live in this *swarga*. The temples with their gradually rising towers depict this Mt. Meru and so the inhabitants of heaven, the gods and celestial beings, are placed around the temple in the form of sculpture.

The architecture of temples

Most of the architectural elements are the same in all temples and each has a specific name. The sanctum sanctorum is called

the *garbha griha* — the womb house. It is a square cell that is usually plain and undecorated inside so that all the attention is focussed on the deity that is placed in the centre. The *garbha griha* has its only door facing the East so that it gets the first rays of the sun. Traditionally the other three walls have no openings.

The *garbha griha* is surrounded by a rectangular corridor called the *pradakshina patha*, that is used for the circumambulation of the deity. On the outside walls of the *garbha griha*, in the three cardinal points of the North, South and West, there are niches for images. The tallest tower is always over the *garbha griha*, which is the *shikhara*. The earliest temples were usually just the *garbha griha* with a small porch before it. Then an open pillared hall called the *mandapa* was built facing the door of the sanctum. Here devotees could gather and large religious ceremonies like *yagnas* could be held.

Over the centuries the *garbha griha* has remained an essentially simple chamber, the spiritual home of the great mystery. It is the *mandapa* that has seen many elaborations and variations. A porch called the *ardha mandapa* was added first, then a second pillared hall called the *maha mandapa* appeared. The Orissan temples have a *natya mandapa* where dance performances were held and the *bhoga mandapa* where offerings were made to the deity and devotees fed with the *prasada*. Shrines to other gods and goddesses were added in the courtyard around the main sanctum. Then southern temples added a slightly smaller but equally ornate shrine for the consort of the main deity called the *amman* temple. So Shiva got an *amman* shrine dedicated to Parvati and Vishnu to Lakshmi. A *mandapa* was then attached to the *amman* shrine

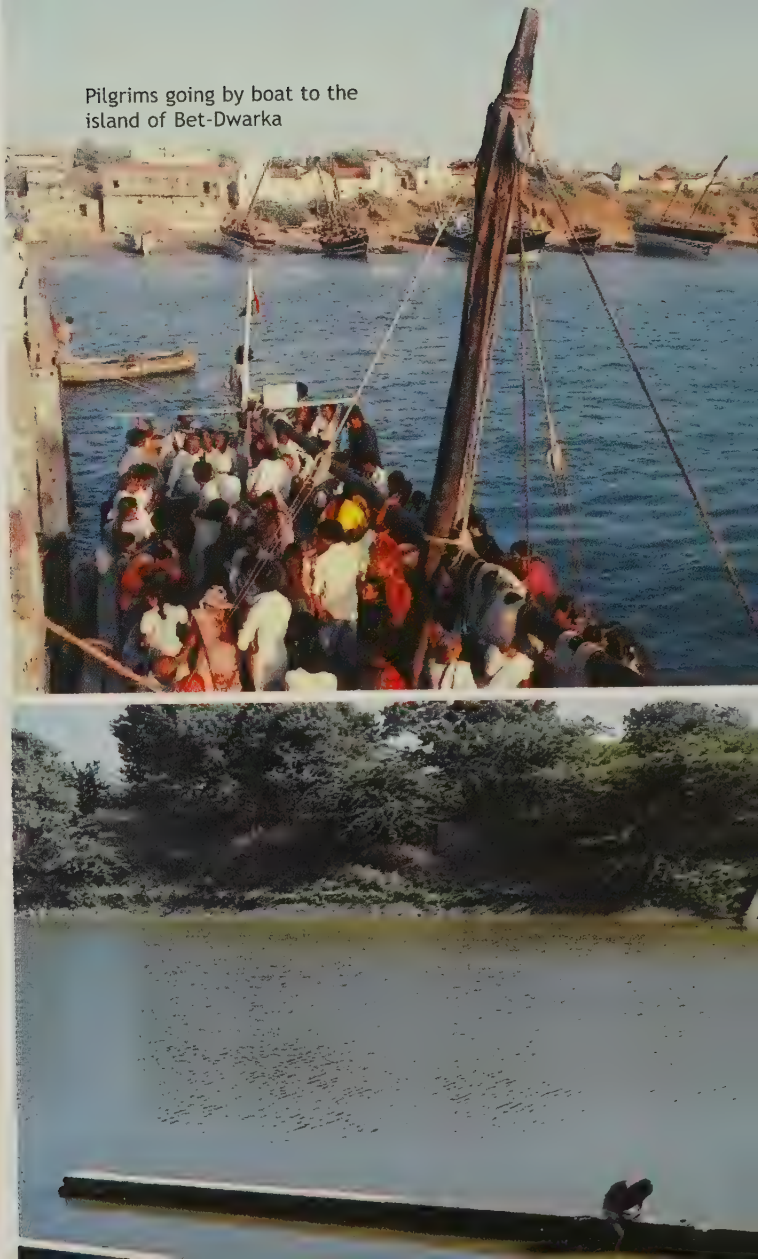
The Dwarkadhish Temple
dedicated to Lord Krishna

At the Dwarkadhish Temple Lord Krishna

(top): The Rukmini Temple is dedicated to Lord Krishna's queen Rukmini; and the river ghats in Dwarka

Wall painting in
the Nageshwar
Mahadev Temple

Pilgrims going by boat to the island of Bet-Dwarka



Old haveli in the island of Bet (top); and market stall in Dwarka

called the *kalyana mandapa*, where a celestial wedding ceremony is performed every year during the *Brahmotsavam* festival.

During the reign of the Chola kings in the south the temples began to be enclosed and fortified by a high stone wall. The wall was pierced at the four cardinal directions by entrances and over them the amazing *gopuram* gateways appeared. Soaring gateways teeming with figurative carvings - human and divine figures, animals, birds and demons, all painted in vivid, eyecatching colours.

With each generation these pyramidal towers rose higher and became more elaborate till they towered over the main *shikhara*. The larger temples were then enclosed within a series of courtyards called *prakaras*, each with *gopurams*, so that you walked under a row of *gopurams* gradually diminishing in height till you reached the final courtyard with the main temple.

Chiselling life out of stone

Our temples are as much a creation of sculptors as the work of architects. In Indian temples the basic structure of the building is concealed by a profusion of carvings and the finest works of Indian sculptors are to be found here. These forgotten artists remained anonymous and did not win any personal fame for their work. There is a vibrant exuberance in the shape and posture of figures and a frank enjoyment of every aspect of life in their work.

Originally the *garbha griha* held just one image but with rituals and festivals becoming more elaborate, the number of icons grew. There is the main icon, the *Mulamurti*, which is

immovable and worshipped in the sanctum. The *Utsavamurti*, the movable image, is taken out in procession during festivals. Then images of the consorts of the god, his famous devotees like the sage Shankaracharya or *Bhakti* poet Chaitanya were placed in the sanctum. Finally even his weapons, like Vishnu's *sudarshana chakra*, found place and worship in the sanctum.

In the temple sculptures, an idealised image of heaven was created. Gods and humans wear richly pleated clothes, elaborate hair-dos and heavy jewellery. The *apsaras* are perfectly shaped, with narrow waists, curvaceous breasts and hips and long, sinuous arms. The demons are utterly ferocious with misshapen bodies, bared teeth and protruding eyes. This is a portrait of heaven, so the bodies are always youthful, their features perfectly proportioned and there is an expression of vivacity and cheerfulness on most of the faces. Even the wild haired ascetic is usually quite well fed and benignly smiling.

A temple is what you want it to be. For the devotee it is the place where his god lives. For the connoisseur of sculpture and painting, it is like a living museum. For a dancer, the figures carved on the walls are the foundation of her art. For a musician or poet, the deity is both inspiration and the final audience. You don't have to enter a temple to pray, you can go there to savour the many aspects of India's rich and iridescent culture.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dwarka — Dwaravati

KRISHNA'S DHAAM BY THE SEA

"His form was bearing the Srivatsa mark, blue like a rainy cloud, brilliant like burnished gold, wearing a pair of silken garments and the most auspicious in appearance.

It was adorned with a sacred thread, a crown, bracelets, armlets, a necklace of pearls, a pair of anklets, rings and the Kaustabha jewel.

His person was encircled by a vanamala, a garland of special sylvan flowers. It was attended by his weapons. He was seated with his lotus-like reddish left foot on his right thigh."

— Description of Krishna at his death by K.M.Munshi in his book 'Krishnavatar'.

Since time immemorial the foam-flecked waves of the Arabian Sea have swept across the shore at Dwarka as the temple bells ring out, calling the devotees to the evening *aarti*. The tides

endlessly flowing over the sand like eternal worshippers praying at the feet of Lord Krishna.

Dwar means a doorway and *ka* means eternal bliss. So when Lord Krishna built his city of Dwarka he wanted it to be the place where people could attain eternal bliss and the knowledge of the supreme deity. Once this region was ancient Kushasthali ruled by the Sharyatas. Krishna and his Yadava clan came from Mathura, rebuilt on the ruins of Kushasthali and by the sea rose the fabulous 'suvarna nagari', the golden city of Dwarka. Today Dwarka-Dwaravati is one of the most sacred *tirthas* in the western region of Saurashtra in Gujarat.

The terrain of Gujarat moves from the salt flats and marshes of the Rann of Kutch to the fertile banks of the Narmada river. India's coastline along the Arabian Sea begins here and the people have a tradition of maritime trade that goes back thousands of years. Lothal, a part of the Indus Valley Civilisation may have been a port. Another ancient Indian port was Bharukachha or Bhrigukachha that is today known as Bharuch.

Dwarka and Prabhas Patan, where Lord Krishna reigned, were also prosperous ports during the time of the *Mahabharata*, dating back to approximately 1400 BC. Later the ports of Porbander, Cambay and Surat saw Arab dhows and Portuguese galleons lay anchor. As Mughal ships set sail for the Middle East carrying silks, cotton and spices and returned laden with gold and silver.

This region has a rich tradition of handicrafts – fabrics woven, printed and embroidered in eye catching hues, jewellery and carvings in wood and stone. The Gujarati stone carvers, the *silavats*, were famous for their exquisite work and

travelled across the land to build temples. Even during the reign of the Mughals many came to Agra to work on the red sandstone palace walls and pillars of Akbar's royal city of Fatehpur Sikri and then on the Taj Mahal. The craftspeople of this region have a natural affinity for colour and design and this was reflected in the Hindu and Jain temples that were built all across Gujarat.

Gujarat can trace its history back to the time of the *Mahabharata* because Lord Krishna built his capital of Dwarka here. From ancient times, this has been a region of not just powerful kings but also wealthy merchants who took pride in being patrons of the arts and the builders of temples. The most famous temple was of course the Somnath Temple in Saurashtra that was legendary for its fabulous wealth and acted like a magnet for Muslim invaders and Sultans in medieval times. Somnath and Dwarka are the most important *tirthas* in the region. The first as the seat of a *jyotirlingam* of Shiva and the other dedicated to the worship of Lord Krishna.

In Dwarka, ancient and deeply venerated temples stand by the sandy beaches and by the banks of the Gomati River as it flows into the sea, shrines that still celebrate the life and exploits of Krishna, the great warrior-king-god who ruled from here. The epic *Mahabharata* tells us that Krishna created a magnificent city here, the capital of his kingdom of Dwarka or Dwaravati. Today the stones of ancient Dwarka lie fathoms deep beneath the waves but his undaunted, compassionate spirit still beckons the pilgrim from every corner of the land.

Dwarka means a door or gateway and Krishna wanted his city to be the gateway to peace and serenity. As the eighth

avatar of Vishnu, he was one of the most powerful kings of his time and so his city had to be the finest in the land. Called by many names, Dwarka - Dwaravati - Dwarkapuri - Dwarika, it was a city of such legendary grandeur that it rivalled the other great capitals of its time — Hastinapur of the Kauravas, Magadha of Jarasandha and Indraprastha of the Pandavas.

Next to Mathura and Vrindavan it is Dwarka that is linked to the life of Krishna and the temples here celebrate the many episodes of his life. Some temples are also dedicated to people who were connected to his life, like his wife Rukmini or his childhood friend Sudama and even his great devotee Mirabai. So pilgrims not only worship at the temples dedicated to Krishna but also those of his queen Rukmini, mother Devaki and brother Balarama. Like Lord Rama, Krishna was also considered an ideal king by Hindu rajas, many of whom claimed him as an ancestor. So over the centuries many royal families, like the Solankis and Gaekwads, built temples here and kept the worship of Krishna alive.

Dwarka as a *tirthasthana* is twice blessed — it is both a *Saptapuri* and one of the *Chaar Dhaam*. No other place of pilgrimage, not even the supreme tirtha of Kashi, is both a *puri* and a *dhaam*. The four *dhaams* are the sacred abodes of Vishnu and the other three are Badrinath, Puri and Rameshwaram. As the *dhaams* are placed at the four cardinal points of the land, Dwarka is the *paschim dhaam*, the *dhaam* of the west.

Dwarka is also the *tirtha* where Adi Shankaracharya established one of his monastic orders — the Sharada Math. This Math continues to be among the most important spiritual establishments of the Hindus. The other three Shankaracharya Maths are at Badrinath, Puri and Kanchipuram. In the

twentieth century, the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were immersed in the sea at Dwarka. The Gandhi Ghat had been built by the sea here in his memory.

In Myths & Legends

Krishna was born and brought up in the Mathura - Vrindavan region, by the banks of the Yamuna, but he established his kingdom at Dwarka. This exodus to the west is one of the most interesting tales in the *Mahabharata*. Krishna of Mathura was after all one of the most powerful kings of north India. What could have made him abandon his kingdom and take his people across the subcontinent to Saurashtra?

It all began when Krishna and his brother Balarama defeated and killed Kansa, the evil king of Mathura who had usurped the throne from his own father. Unfortunately this meant that he made an enemy of Jarasandha, the powerful king of Magadha. Two of Jarasandha's daughters had been married to Kansa and he took a vow that he would not let Krishna rule in peace.

Krishna was a great king, wise and benevolent and there was happiness and prosperity in his kingdom that angered the bitter Jarasandha even more. He attacked Mathura eighteen times and was defeated by Krishna in every battle but he refused to give up. Krishna was confident he could defeat Jarasandha again, after all the finest warriors of the land were among his clan of Yadavas. These chariot-riding warriors called *maharathis* were ready to battle on but years of conflict had exhausted his people and peace had fled from Mathura. Then the danger increased when Jarasandha's ally, Kalayavahan, the king of the Yavanas decided to attack

Mathura from the west exactly when Jarasandha was gathering his army for the nineteenth invasion from the east.

Krishna, a supremely pragmatic king, now chose to move away from this never ending conflict. He wanted to avoid more bloodshed and felt his subjects deserved to be freed from this perpetual state of war. So he led his people across the land on a long exodus to the western coast of Saurashtra where he built a new kingdom by the Arabian Sea, with the fabulous capital city of Dwarka. The myths say that Krishna and his people were guided to Dwarka by the divine bird Garuda. Krishna's choice for the location of his capital was strategic as Dwarka was protected by a ring of hills on one side and by the sea on the other three. As a matter of fact, Dwarka never faced an attack by Jarasandha.

Soon Dwarka became a busy port that also made his kingdom prosperous and Krishna filled his city-fortress with magnificent palaces and gardens. The *Mahabharata* has many descriptions of this magnificent ancient city. However one must remember that Dwarka was built by a king who was in retreat and in Gujarat Krishna is also worshipped as Ranchhodji because of his flight from Mathura to Dwarka. *Ran* means battle and *chhod* is to leave and Ranchhodji is one who left a battlefield.

The move to Dwarka was a tactical retreat and Krishna had no intention of letting either Jarasandha or Kalyavahan survive. He just moved the battle to an arena that he had chosen. So once his people had been settled, Krishna ventured out of Dwarka to tackle Kalyavahan alone. Kalyavahan had chased Krishna into Saurashtra and was preparing to lay siege to Dwarka. Making sure that the Yavana king had spotted him,

Krishna raced away from the city on his chariot and lured his enemy into the hills. Then running on foot he climbed up into the hills and hid inside a particular cave.

Kalyavahan saw Krishna enter the cave and climbed up alone, to find a man asleep at the mouth of the cave. Thinking the man was Krishna, he kicked the sleeping figure to wake him and was instantly burnt to ashes. As Krishna had known, this sleeping man was named Muchkunda, who was a king who had once helped the gods against the asuras. When the gods wanted to bless him he asked for a very unusual boon. He gained a boon from Brahma that he could sleep as much as he liked and if anyone woke him, that person would be burnt to ashes. So when Kalyavana kicked him, he opened his eyes and his fiery glance was enough to kill the Yavana king.

The mighty Jarasandha had to be defeated next and again Krishna chose strategy and personal action instead of war. Jarasandha, who was a worshipper of Shiva, had captured and kept eighty five kings and princes captive in Magadha and he threatened to sacrifice them to his god once the total reached a hundred. Krishna with his friends Arjuna and Bhima went to Magadha in the guise of brahmins and Bhima challenged Jarasandha to a wrestling match. In the combat that followed, Jarasandha was killed by Bhima.

Krishna and his elder brother Balarama ruled in Dwarka for thirty six years. Krishna was a magnificent king, widely respected by other kings and was also the closest ally and adviser of the Pandavas. He had three chief wives — Rukmini, the princess of Vidarbha; Satyabhama, daughter of Shatrajit, a Yadava chieftain who possessed the famous Syamantaka jewel; and Jambavati, daughter of the tribal king Jambavan.

Rukmini was already the queen when the Yadavas were reigning in Mathura, Krishna married Satyabhama and Jambavati at Dwarka. Usually when Krishna is worshipped as Dwarkadhish, the king of Dwarka, it is Rukmini who is worshipped with him.

The Vishnu Purana of course credits him with sixteen thousand wives and one lakh eighty thousand sons! Once his enemies had been vanquished and he reigned supreme, Krishna became deeply involved in the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas that forms the tale of the *Mahabharata*. His alliance with the Pandava brothers and especially his close friendship with Arjuna are the highlights of this epic. It is at Dwarka that Arjuna fell in love with Krishna's sister Subhadra. Balarama did not approve of the romance but Krishna helped Arjuna and Subhadra to elope. For Arjuna, his 'sakha' Krishna was not merely a friend but also an ally, confidant and mentor. Krishna was beside him with help and advice during every pivotal moment of his life, always offering help at moments of great adversity.

At the gambling match between the warring cousins of Hastinapur — the Kauravas and Pandavas, Yudhishthira lost his kingdom and then wagered and lost himself, his brothers and then his wife. Then the Pandava brothers who had been reduced to slaves, watched in helpless rage as Draupadi was dragged into court and publicly humiliated by the Kauravas. At this moment of crisis, it was Krishna who came to the rescue of Draupadi and saved her from the clutches of the uncivilised Duhshasana.

Krishna tried desperately to avoid a war but when war became inevitable both Duryodhana and Arjuna arrived at

Dwarka to seek Krishna's support. Krishna made it clear that he would not personally fight for any side and would only drive a warrior's chariot. Then he offered them a choice — they could take his army or his services as a charioteer. Arjuna chose Krishna and Duryodhana was very pleased to get Krishna's huge *Narayani* army.

So the great Krishna, the most powerful and influential of the kings of Bharata, was happy to be a mere charioteer of his best friend. As historian Irawati Karve says, "The Pandavas did not lack warriors; what they needed was a dispassionate determined counsellor. That they found in Krishna". It is this compassionate, modesty and humanity that has made Krishna one of the truly unforgettable heroes of the *Mahabharata*.

On the first day of battle, as the two armies stood ranged against each other, Arjuna faced a profound moral dilemma. He looked across the battlefield and saw his enemy and they were people he loved. He had to battle and kill his teachers, cousins, childhood friends and a beloved old grandfather. When a heartbroken Arjuna despondently laid down his bow and refused to fight, it was Krishna who spoke the words of the *Bhagavat Gita* and gave Arjuna the moral strength to fight. The *Bhagavat Gita* teaches of the duties of a person and then explains the concept of Karma Yoga — a subtle and at times abstruse path of life. Krishna preaches dutiful action balanced by a calm non-involvement.

> "You can realise Brahman," says Krishna to Arjuna, "only by fulfilling the duties of your position on earth. Not ascetic retreat, but dispassionate, considered action is the only way to the Absolute".

Throughout the war the charioteer Krishna was the main strategist of the Pandavas and played a vital role in their victory. After the victory at the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the Pandavas once again reigned from Hastinapur and Krishna returned to Dwarka.

Krishna's last days were darkened by hopelessness and tragedy. Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, had cursed him that just as she had to face the death of her sons, Krishna too would see the end of all he had worked to build. And this terrible curse now came true. As he watched in horror, his beloved Dwarka became a decadent city where the men of the Yadava clan became steeped in debauchery. Balarama and Krishna had to ban the drinking of wine. However when he allowed the serving of wine at a festival in Prabhas Patan his clansmen began to kill each other in a drunken brawl.

K.M.Munshi in his book 'Krishnavatara' describes this final destruction of a once great clan, "At that very sacred place, as Fate would have it, Yadavas lost their judgement and drank the highly intoxicating sweet beverage, a liquor called Maireyaka by the filtrates of which the reasoning faculty is completely lost... When the arrows were being exhausted and bows got broken and their weaponry was finished they pulled out and clenched into fists the eraka grass that grew abundantly on the shore as weapons. And lo! The eraka grass when held by them in their fists became adamant like hard iron bars with which they struck their adversaries. When forbidden by Krishna, they turned against him and attacked him."

After Krishna's son Pradyumna and grandson Aniruddha were killed before their eyes, Krishna and Balarama withdrew into the forest of Prabhas Patan where Balarama breathed his

last. Krishna's charioteer Daruka came in search of his master and Krishna ordered him to hurry to Hastinapur and request Arjuna to come and save the defenceless women and children of Dwarka from his enemies. Then Krishna fell to the arrow of a hunter who mistook him for a deer. The most complete of the avatars of Vishnu rose to heaven and was merged into the radiance of the god. With Krishna's death his kingdom also came to an end as a huge tidal wave rose from the sea and swept away the palaces of fabulous Dwarka.

The *Bhagavat Purana* says that Krishna had already predicted this end of his city of Dwarka. Talking to his childhood friend Uddhava, he had said, "The clan (of Yadavas) already consumed as it is by the imprecation (of the brahmanas) will surely be exterminated by mutual infighting and the sea will overflow and submerge this city on the seventh day, when I am no more here". With his death the third of the Hindu ages, the *Dvaipar Yuga* ends and the last age, of *Kali Yuga* is said to have begun.

By this time most of the Yadava men were dead and Dwarka had vanished under the sea. Arjuna who came to perform Krishna and Balarama's funeral took the Yadava women and children back with him to Indraprastha. Later Krishna's great-grandson Vajranabha, the son of Aniruddha was anointed the king by Arjuna and began to rule from Mathura. Vajranabha came to Dwarka to build a temple in the memory of his great ancestor. Over the centuries many kings have built temples in Saurashtra and among them the most recent have been Rani Ahilyabai of Indore and the Gaekwad kings of Baroda.

Story of a Tirtha

The Srimad Bhagavatam has a description of the grandeur of Dwarka as narrated by the sage Narada. Ancient Dwarka was also known as Kushasthali and the city plan was the work of Vishwakarma, the architect of the gods and he had laid down broad avenues lined by shady trees. The city had four main gateways and four important temples, with a temple dedicated to Lord Brahma placed in the centre. Krishna's childhood teacher Sandipan Muni was the chief priest, Anadhrishti was the commander-in-chief and Vikadru was the prime minister. Officially Ugrasen and then Balarama were the kings of Dwarka but in fact it was always Krishna who was the real leader of the Yadavas and the source of power.

Dwarka had gardens and orchards surrounding the palaces and mansions. The palaces of Krishna and his chief queens were made of marble with silver doors. The pillars of Krishna's palace were made of coral, set with jewels like sapphires and emeralds and embellished with intricate carvings. The canopies of silk were decorated with gold thread and edged with strings of pearls. The furniture was made of ivory inlaid with gold and precious gems, and the rooms were lit by jewelled lamps.

Historically, archaeologists agree that the Dwarka region has been inhabited since the time of the epics. Archaeological explorations on land and sea have proved that an ancient city did exist at Dwarka and that a part of it was claimed by the sea. The ruins of a port and the remains of an ancient stone city wall now lie underwater along the coastline. Terracotta pots found near the present town of Dwarka have been dated

to 1300 BC. A giant 250kg stone used to anchor ships was found on the seabed and dated to an even earlier 1400BC, when scholars speculate that the great battle of *Mahabharata* may have taken place. The stone anchor that must have belonged to a very large ship proves that Dwarka was a busy port.

The ruins of Dwarka prove that this ancient city had been planned very carefully, anticipating natural disasters and attacks from the enemy. It had high walls and stone embankments to protect it from any invasion from the sea or land. But the relentless ocean still did not let it survive and some time in our long forgotten past, it swept in and claimed Krishna's Dwarka in one moment of cataclysmic tragedy.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dwarkadhish Temple

"Should I be a man, then let me, Raskhan mingle there with the herdsmen of Gokul.
If as a beast, then how shall I live but ever grazing among the cows of Nanda?
If a stone, then one of the very hills he made an umbrella for Vraja against the torrents of Indra.
If a bird, then let me dwell forever in the boughs of a Kadamba tree on the banks of the Yamuna."

— hymn in praise of Lord Krishna by the 16th century poet Raskhan.

The most sacred shrine to Krishna in Dwarka is the Dwarkadhish Temple and Krishna is worshipped here not as the lovable child-god or the flute-playing cowherd, but as a resplendent king. Here he is Dwarkadhish, the Lord of Dwarka. The deity is also affectionately called Ranchhodji, the god who left a battlefield, in memory of the Yadava exodus from Mathura.

Built in the 16th century, the five storey high temple is built on 72 pillars, with the soaring *shikhara* over the *garbha griha*. On the apex of the spire flies a huge flag. Legends say that the first temple was built here by Krishna's great-grandson Vajranabha. That temple was built at the site where Krishna's personal palace, the Hari Griha once stood before it was claimed by the sea. As with most ancient temples, the Jagat Mandir has been added to for many centuries. The oldest part of the temple has been dated to the Gupta period in the 5th century and the newest sections were built in the 18th century.

Krishna, the Lord of Dwarka

Krishna, King of Mathura and Dwarka is the eighth avatar of Vishnu and one of his most popular and worshipped incarnations. Like Lord Rama, he was a warrior and king who ruled in the Gangetic plain and over the centuries he became deified as an avatar. The epic *Mahabharata*, in which Krishna plays a pivotal role, mentions the history of Rama and so it can be presumed that Rama had lived before Krishna. Like Rama, his legend begins with a victory in a war, though Krishna's role as a warrior is far more complex, as it is combined with those of a philosopher and statesman. And like Rama, myths that have grown around him span his complete life from birth to death.

Krishna, the 'dark one' is by far the most complex, intricately imagined and surprisingly human of the ten Vishnu avatars. There are so many aspects to his character that he attracts worshippers of every kind. His cult, the sect of the Vaishnavas worship him not just as a celestial god but also as a lovable child, a carefree, flute-playing cowherd, a handsome

divine lover, a benevolent king, the invincible warrior and finally as Narayan, the scholar and philosopher.

Just as the epic tale of the *Ramayana* took Lord Rama into every Hindu home, the words of Lord Krishna as collected in the *Bhagavat Gita* made him their spiritual guide. Through his words in the *Bhagavat Gita*, Hindus gained a set of religious and ethical teachings that have guided their spiritual and temporal lives for centuries. What is even more amazing is that the words of the *Bhagavat Gita* are relevant even today. People discover newer ways to interpret the verses to accommodate them in their lives. Written at least a millenium ago, the simple, practical words of the *Gita* have the suppleness of thought that continues to provide a way to face the dilemmas of modern life.

The name of Krishna is first found in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* where a brahmin scholar named Krishna, son of Devaki, is mentioned. Krishna's life and exploits as a warrior-king can be found in the *Mahabharata*. In that epic he is very much a human being, a powerful and respected king but there is no mention of his childhood or youth. However by the time the *Harivamsa* and the *Bhagavat Purana* were written, he had been transformed into a divine being. As historian Sukumari Bhattacharji says, "The Harivamsa creates a fully human and yet a fully divine hero."

In medieval times, like Rama, Krishna also became the inspiration of the mystic Bhakti movement and poet-saints like the Alvars in the south, Meerabai, Surdas, and Jaidev, who have all sung his praises in immortal verse. Meera's bhajans, the Alvar hymns, Jaidev's exquisite 'Gita Govinda' and 'Prem Sagar' which is the Hindi version of the *Bhagavat Purana* are

all woven into the traditions of Vaishnava worship. As Mirabai sang of her dark hued lord,

> "I'm coloured with the colour of dusk, O Rana
> Coloured with the colours of my Lord.
> Drumming out the rhythms on the drums,
> I danced,
> Dancing in the presence of the saints,
> Coloured with the colours of my Lord."

The two hero-avatars of Vishnu – Rama and Krishna – both have lives that move through great upheavals of triumphs and adversities and have epic tragic ends. Both began as heroes of the martial songs of the balladeers and as their legends grew they acquired the halo of being the incarnations of Vishnu. In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna is merely the powerful king of Dwarka and is depicted as a shrewd strategist and a visionary king who makes sure his side wins. He is remote and regal, thoughtful and conniving — qualities that still fascinate thinkers and writers. He is unpredictable, volatile, with an ironic wit and he is far from perfect. This Krishna is mortal with human frailties but by the time of the *Harivamsa* and the *Bhagavat Purana* he had absorbed the beliefs of many cults and the teachings of popular philosophers and become a god.

As the *Mahabharata* gives no details of his childhood in Vrindavan, growing up among the cowherds or his romance with Radha, scholars have often wondered how these elements entered his legends. One intriguing theory is that the South had a flute playing, cowherd god named Mayon or Mayavan, 'the dark one' who had myths about sporting with milkmaids. The cult of this god was brought to the north-west by the pastoral

tribe of the Abhiras, who settled down in the Dwarka region. Once the Abhiras began to worship Krishna, Mayon's playful life with the *gopis* was merged with the myth of the king of Dwarka.

Some scholars feel that the teachings of a philosopher named Narayana, the son of Viswaka, were also incorporated into the beliefs of the Krishna cult. The teachings that have been collected in the *Gita* are the result of a great stream of thought that was credited to Krishna and polished into one of the most profound treatises of Hindu thought. These verses of the *Bhagavat Gita* were added later to the tale of the great war at Kurukshetra and placing them beside the moral dilemma of Arjuna was an act of brilliant inspiration, as it provided it with an unforgettably dramatic backdrop.

Krishna is believed to be the most complete manifestation of Vishnu and for his devotees he is a truly many faceted god. There is always some aspect of him that appeals to a devotee – the legendary hero, the divine lover, the playful child, king, statesman, thinker, mystic and god. Krishna's immense and complex character encompasses every aspect of human experience and it is this vividness that has made him so popular.

If Surdas sang of the butter - stealing Govinda, for Mirabai and Andal he was their eternal lover and friend. For Chaitanya and Nityananda his teachings make him the source of all wisdom and enlightenment. And through it all he remains complicated, vulnerable and a very human god whose myths are painted in both black and white. The god Krishna is very easy to love.

Krishna has innumerable names. He is Govinda, the cowherd; Damodara because he dragged away the mortar tied

to his belly; Gopal, king of the cowherds; Gopinath, lord of the milkmaids; Mathuranath, Lord of Mathura; Dwarkadhish, Lord of Dwarka, Radharaman, Radha's love; Goverdhan, the boy who raised the Goverdhan hill; the resplendant Vasudeva and enlightened Bhagavat. His brother Balarama, who carried a plough share, is called Haladhara and Sankarshana.

Krishna's icons reflect the many moods of this vibrant and colourful god. He is dark skinned, always benign and smiling, with perfect features and he wears a peacock feather in his hair. He is shown as the happy cowherd, playing the flute, with Radha beside him. He is depicted as a crawling child holding a ball of butter, a boy dancing on the hoods of the serpent Kaliya and holding up the Goverdhan hill. At Puri he is worshipped as Jagannatha with his siblings Balarama and Subhadra.

Krishna the king is a majestic figure, carved out of black stone, clad in yellow-gold silk, wearing much jewellery and a crown. He wears two famous jewels, the *Syamantaka* and the *Kaustabha*. As the warrior he rides a chariot that floats like a cloud. It is driven by his charioteer Daruka and drawn by four white horses named – Balahak, Meghpushp, Shaivya and Sugreev. Over the chariot flies the flag called the *Garuda Dhwaja*. He carries weapons like the discus, *Sudarshana Chakra*, the mace called the *Kaumodaki gada*, a bow called *Saranga* and a plough share *Samvartaka hala*. He blows on the conch *Panchajanaya* to announce a battle.

The Vaishanavas who worship Vishnu are among the largest sects in the land and among all the *avatars* of Vishnu, Krishna is the easiest to love and worship as he is the most human and accessible. He is compassionate and just.

humorous and wise and also fierce in his defence of good against evil. He is the ally of the good when *dharma* is threatened. For his devotees Krishna is friend, spiritual guide and god.

Krishna's birthday on Janamashtami is one of the most important religious festivals of the Hindus. Temples in Brajabhoomi enact the folk drama of the *Krishnaleela* showing all his superhuman feats. The spring festival of Holi is also woven into the Krishna legend as he is said to have sprayed the *gopis* with colour.

The Dwarkadhish Temple

The present temple was built by Raja Jagat Singh Rathore and is also called Jagat Mandir. It stands in the heart of the town of Dwarka in the middle of a crowded bazaar. The temple is seven storey tall, built in granite and sandstone and shaped like a chariot. It rests on 72 carved pillars. It has the sanctum – the *garbha griha* and two assembly halls – the *vimana mandapa* and a *natya mandapa*. The shikhara spire is topped by the carved pot shaped *suvarna kalasha*.

There are two entrances to the Dwarkadhish Temple called *Swarga Dwar*, the gateway to heaven and *Moksha Dwar*, the gateway to salvation. From the *Swarga Dwar* a flight of steps lead down to the Gomati River. From the entrance the large halls of the *vimana mandapa* and the *natya mandapa* lead to the *garbha griha* that is called Jagat Mandir or Nija Mandir. These walls and pillars of these *mandapas* are decorated with many ancient and modern sculptures

The deity in the *garbha griha* is not an image of Krishna but of Vishnu. Here the god is in the form of the Trivikrama, with

four arms holding the discus *Sudarshana Chakra*, the mace *Kaumodaki*, the conch *Panchajanya* and the lotus *Padma*. This is the form of Vishnu as the magnificent king of the universe, resplendent in jewels and silks placed on a silver throne. And as he is a majestic king, the clothes worn by the deity are changed many times every day. The temple also has shrines to Satyanarayan, Ambaji, Durvas Muni, Lakshmi Narayan and Rukmini.

Legends say at least three images of Ranchhodji-Dwarkadhish have been consecrated at this temple. The first idol of Dwarkadhish was taken to Dakor and established at the Dwarkadhish Temple there. The second was taken away to the temple on the island of Bet Dwarka. This is the third image that has been established in the sanctum sanctorum. Mirabai, the poet-saint of Mewar who composed some of the most beautiful verses to her dark lord, left Chittor and spent her last days at Dwarka. She worshipped Ranchhodji at this temple. There is a small temple dedicated to her near the Gopi Tallava on the way to the seaside town of Okha.

CHAPTER SIX

Other Sacred Places

There are a number of other temples and sacred spaces in and around Dwarka that are visited by pilgrims. They are all built to commemorate episodes in the life of Krishna or they are dedicated to people who were a part of his life. Pilgrims often travel to the nearby island of Bet Dwarka to visit the temples there.

Rukmini Temple

Rukmini was Krishna's principal queen and her beautiful marble temple stands at the northern end of the town, close to the sea. Rukmini, the princess of Vidarbha was betrothed against her will to Sisupala, the king of Chedi. She had fallen in love with Krishna and wanting to escape from her imminent marriage, she asked for his help. She and Krishna eloped from her wedding *mandapa* and were chased by Sisupala and Rukmini's brother Rukmin. Krishna defeated them in battle and married Rukmini. This made Sisupala a life long enemy of Krishna and he allied himself with Jarasandha, the king of

Magadha who had vowed to kill Krishna. After Jarasandha's death, Sisupala was killed by Krishna at a *rajasuya yajna* held by the Pandavas at Indraprastha.

The Rukmini Temple was built in the 12th century and it has a marble image of the queen in the sanctum. The pretty shrine is exquisitely decorated with carvings and with frescoes that depict the main episodes of Krishna's life. The temple also has paintings of the ten *avatars* of Vishnu.

There is an interesting myth about why Rukmini's shrine stands at a distance from the Dwarkadhish Temple. It begins with the curse of Durvasas, a sage who was known for his bad temper and predilection for cursing anyone who displeased him. It is said that Rishi Durvasas once invited Krishna and Rukmini to dinner. The social etiquette of the time said that a guest would not eat or drink anything before they were served by their host. On the way to Durvasas' ashram Rukmini became thirsty and begged Krishna for some water. He struck the ground with his foot and a spring appeared. Unfortunately while Rukmini was drinking at the spring, Durvasas appeared and saw her and promptly cursed her that she would never be worshipped in the same temple as Krishna. So poor Rukmini has to be worshipped far away from the shrine of her consort.

The Ghats

The Gomati River flows right behind the Dwarkadhish Temple and there are a number of ghats and temples by its banks. It is said that many sages prayed to the river Ganga to appear at Dwarka and she came here as the Gomati. The *Gomati Ghat Temple* stands beside the flight of steps that lead down from the Dwarkadhish Temple to the river. The *Chakra Tirtha Ghat*

is at the place where the river meets the ocean and pilgrims believe it is highly auspicious to bathe there. The *Samudra Narayan Temple* also stands at the sacred confluence of the Gomati River and the sea.

Bhadrakali Temple

This temple is located in the heart of the city. It is said that in ancient Dwarka the Yadavas worshipped the four armed goddess Mahakali at this temple. The shrine to the Mother Goddess is also one of the fifty one *shakti peethas*, the sacred seats of the goddess Devi. Nearby is the *Siddheshwara Mahadeva Temple* and the myth says that the *shivalingam* was consecrated here by Lord Brahma himself.

Another holy site is the *Panchanada Tirtha*, it has five sweet water wells surrounded by the salty sea and is named after the five Pandava brothers. It is said that the water in each well tastes different. At the *Chakra Narayan Temple*, Vishnu is worshipped as a stone marked with a wheel like chakra. The *Gomati Temple* has an image of the Gomati as a river goddess and the image is said to have been established here by the sage Vasishtha Muni. There is a lighthouse here and the view from the top provides a spectacular panorama of the sea.

Sharada Math

The Adi Shankaracharya established one of his four mathas at Dwarka in the 9th century. He called it the Sharada Math and the deity worshiped here is of Shiva in his form as Chandra Moulishvara. It is said that the Shankaracharya found the image of Chandra Moulishvara at the confluence of the Gomati River and the sea. The Math also has shrines to

Saraswati, Krishna and his queens, twelve hundred Shalagram shilas, thirteen hundred Shivalingams and the images of past Shankaracharyas who have headed the Sharada Math.

Other Shrines

Pilgrims travel out of Dwarka to visit the *Nageshwara Mahadev Temple* which is about 17 km from the city. The *lingam* is said to have been consecrated here by Lord Brahma himself. The temple *Shivalingam* is a *jyotirlingams* and is placed in an underground sanctum. The sacred tank called *Gopi Tallav* is 23 km from Dwarka. Here Krishna met the gopis of Vrindavan when they came to see him. The clay of the bank is called Gopi Chandana and is used by Vaishnava devotees to draw a *tilaka* on their forehead.

Bet Dwarka

The island *tirtha* of Bet Dwarka is 30 km north of Dwarka and is a 20 km boat ride from the coastal town of Okha. Krishna's grandson Aniruddha used to stay at Okha. It is said that when Krishna decided to build Dwarka here, he borrowed 12 yojanas of land from the sea and when he died, the sea reclaimed what it had gifted to him. Only the tiny island of Bet Dwarka remains as a memory of Krishna's fabulous city.

Another Dwarkadhish Temple stands on the island. This temple, built in the 19th century, has an image of Krishna as Ranchhodji, holding a sword and shield, laden with jewels and surrounded by shrines to his queens. The walls of the *natya mandap* are painted with delightful murals.

The other temples on the island are the Sita Ram Temple, Omkarnath Ashram, Hanuman Gadhi, Padmatirtha, Ram

Dwarka and the Sudama Bhetsthal Temple. There is a temple dedicated to Balarama, who is called Dauji, elder brother. Sudama, Krishna's childhood friend met Krishna here and some say that the word Bet stands for the simple gift of grain that he gave Krishna.

Another myth around Bet Dwarka says that a demon named Shankha stole the Vedas from Brahma. So Vishnu took the form of a fish, the Matsya Avatar, to defeat and kill him at Bet Dwarka. In fact Bet means island in Gujarati. This conch shell shaped island was also called Shankha Dwar Tirtha. The local people claim that this was the original Dwarka and one can see the remains of an ancient sea wall when the tide moves out. Excavations also prove that this is an ancient settlement dating back to the epic age. Some speculate that the palaces of Krishna's queens were at Bet Dwarka and the names of at least fifty six of his wives are still remembered here.

Rituals, Festivals & Fairs

Pilgrims come by the thousand to Dwarka during the monsoons to celebrate Krishna's birth on the night of Janamashtami. The biggest celebrations are at the Dwarkadhish Temple. Basant Panchami, the celebration of spring is also celebrated in the temples here. Holi, on the full moon *Dol Purnima* day, when Krishna and the gopis played with colours, is celebrated with great verve by pilgrims. The festivals of Navaratri and Durga Puja are celebrated at the Bhadrakali Temple in autumn.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Somnath, Prabhas Patan, Modhera

"I have heard from Veda Vyas that for many years you meditated at the Pushkar Tirtha, Badrikashrama, by the banks of the Saraswati River and at Prabhasa Tirtha. You are the ideal kshatriya, the ancient and the eternal, the tapasvi and the symbol of the yagna. Brahma appears on a lotus from your navel, Shiva is born from your forehead."

— Arjuna praising Krishna in the *Mahabharata*

In ancient India, Somnath was the most sacred and famous tirtha of the Saurashtra region. Somnath and the nearby Prabhas Patan are interwoven with the history and legends of the region and are mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. Though both are a part of the life of Lord Krishna, Somnath traces its origins to an ancient myth of the moon god Somadeva and Lord Shiva. Krishna who was a devotee of Shiva came to pray at this temple that has one of the twelve sacred *jyotirlingams*.

This makes Somnath and Prabhas Patan a *tirtha* sacred to both the worshippers of Shiva and Krishna. A visit to Modhera can provide the pilgrim with the unique experience of seeing one of the greatest architectural creations of ancient India. Even in ruins, the temple to the sun god Surya at Modhera is a majestic and moving experience.

Somnath

In ancient texts like the *Mahabharata*, Somnath is called Prabhas Patan. It is the place where Krishna watched the members of his Yadava clan fight and kill each other in a drunken brawl and thus destroy all that he had built at Dwarka.

Deeply disheartened by the behaviour of their clansmen, Krishna and Balarama withdrew into a nearby forest at Prabhas Patan. Balarama died first and then Krishna was killed by the arrow of a hunter named Jara. Krishna's best friend Arjuna came from Hastinapur to cremate their bodies here.

However the Somnath Temple is not dedicated to either Vishnu or Krishna. It is a Shiva temple and its deity is one of the twelve sacred *jyotirlingams*. The Somnath deity is a *swayambhu lingam* or a 'self manifest' *Shivalingams*, that are considered the most sacred of Shaiva shrines.

The *Puranas* say that the first Somnath Temple was built beside the sea by the moon god Somadeva. He was one of the sons-in-law of Prajapati Daksha. Another was Shiva who had married Daksha's daughter Sati with rather tragic consequences. Sati killed herself after Daksha insulted Shiva. Daksha obviously did not believe in cordial relations with the men his daughters married. Soma, who had married many

daughters of Daksha made the mistake of favouring one wife named Rohini over the others. The neglected wives promptly went and complained to their father and Soma earned Daksha's displeasure.

The bad-tempered Prajapati cursed Soma that he would lose his light and to his utter consternation, poor Soma saw his radiance begin to wane. When his light was nearly gone and it had turned into a dark, moonless *amavasya* night, a fearful Soma came to Prabhas Patan. He bathed in the sea and prayed fervently to Shiva to come to his aid. Pleased by his prayers Shiva blessed him and slowly the moon began to gain his light. It is from then on that the moon waxes and wanes. A grateful Soma built a temple in gold to his benevolent benefactor and placed a *jyotirlingam* within it. So at this temple Shiva is called Somnath, the beloved lord of Soma.

Once the Saraswati river flowed into the sea at the spot where the original Somnath Temple used to stand. The *Mahabharata* says that in the *Satya Yuga* the Somnath Temple was built in gold by Somadeva. In the *Treta Yuga*, Ravana, the king of Lanka, who was a great devotee of Shiva, built it in silver. In the *Dvaipar Yuga*, Krishna, as king of Dwarka, built it in sandalwood and in the *Kali Yuga* it was made in marble by the Pandava brother Bhimadeva.

The legends about the stone temple talk of a huge, intricately designed building filled with carvings, pillars inlaid with gold and jewels and solid silver doors. As one of the most sacred *tirthas* in the country, ancient Somnath was a gigantic enterprise. Ten thousand villages were endowed to the temple. There were two thousand brahmins performing the puja and 300 barbers were needed to shave the heads of the priests and

the thousands of pilgrims who visited the temple everyday. There were five hundred dancing girls and three hundred musicians employed by the temple. The water for the puja was carried from the Ganga and the flowers came from the gardens of Kashmir. In the 11th century the temple must have been a truly magnificent shrine.

Somnath was an important port of the region and carried on trade with countries along the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the West African coast. Visitors also came from other lands to see the famous temple. News of the legendary treasures of Somnath travelled across the world and it is mentioned in the chronicles of travellers. There was the Arab scientist-scholar Al Beruni who came with the invading armies of Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century. The Italian Marco Polo, who came to India in the 13th century, and in his chronicles, called the temple "Semenat".

The first temple in historical times was probably built by the brahmin Vishnu Gupta who is known to history as Chanakya or Kautilya, the powerful adviser to Chandragupta Maurya. And it was its legendary treasures that drew Mahmud of Ghazni to attack India in 1026. He carried away an immense booty including the gold *Shivalingam* and the solid silver doors and then razed the temple to the ground. The people rebuilt the temple and on his next raid Mahmud destroyed it again. In the following centuries the temple is said to have been built and destroyed five times, the last time by Aurangzeb.

A thirteenth century Arab account of the Somnath Temple before it was destroyed makes fascinating reading, "Somnat – a celebrated city of India situated on the shore of the sea and

washed by its waves. Among the wonders of that place was the temple in which was placed the idol called Somnat. This idol was in the middle of the temple without anything to support it from below, or to suspend it from above. It was held in the highest honour among the Hindus, and whoever beheld it floating in the air was struck with amazement, whether he was a Musulman or an infidel. The Hindus used to go on pilgrimage to it whenever there was an eclipse of the moon and would then assemble there to the number of more than a hundred thousand."

Then it continues, "The ebb and flow of the tide was considered to be the worship paid to the idol by the sea. Everything of the most precious was brought there as offerings and the temple was endowed with more than ten thousand villages... The edifice was built upon fifty-six pillars of teak covered with lead. The shrine of the idol was dark but was lighted by jewelled chandeliers of great value. Near it was a chain of gold weighing two hundred man. When a portion (watch) of the night closed, this chain used to be shaken like bells to rouse a fresh lot of brahmans to perform worship."

Later there is a description of the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni, "When the king asked his companions what they had to say about the marvel of the idol, and of its staying in the air without prop or support, several maintained that it was upheld by some hidden support. The king directed a person to go and feel all around and above and below it with a spear, which he did and met with no obstacle. One of the attendants then stated his opinion that the canopy was made of loadstone, and the idol of iron, and that the ingenious builder had skilfully contrived that the magnet should not exercise a greater

force on any one side — hence the idol was suspended in the middle. Some coincided, others differed. Permission was obtained from the Sultan to remove some stones from the top of the canopy to settle the point. When two stones were removed from the summit the idol swerved on one side, when more were taken away it inclined still further, until at last it rested on the ground."

When he left in 1025 AD, Mahmud left behind a Muslim governor at Somnath. Present day Somnath still has the ruins of a mosque built by him. The Hindus soon regained power in the region and Kumarpal of Anhilpatan rebuilt the temple in 1169. This temple was destroyed by Alaf Khan Khalji, a brother of Allauddin Khalji, who invaded the region in 1297. From then on the region was ruled by the Delhi sultans who appointed their own governors. The temple was rebuilt by Mahipaldev of Wanthi in 1325 and destroyed by Muzaffar Khan in 1394. Restored once again, the temple was again razed to the ground in 1706 by the orders of Aurangzeb.

In 1770 Somnath was conquered by Diwan Amarji and became a part of the kingdom of Junagadh. In the 18th century Rani Ahilya Bai Holkar of Indore built the sixth temple, a small shrine for the *Shivalingam* of the destroyed shrine. This old temple still stands and has a giant *Shivalingam* made of black stone placed in an underground *garbha griha*. At ground level there is the deity Ahaleshwar Shiva and daily pujas and festivals are still performed here everyday. The most important festivals celebrated at this temple are Kartik Purnima and Mahashivaratri.

The present Somnath Temple was built in 1950 over the original sandstone *brahmashila* of the temple last destroyed.

Built in red sandstone, the temple was designed by the architect C.C. Somapura in the ancient Chalukyan style and was named Kailash Mahameru Prasad. As it stands by the sea, the waters of the Arabian Sea constantly crash against the walls of this majestic temple. President Rajendra Prasad inaugurated the temple in 1951 and as it was built with the active support of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, his statue stands at the entrance called the Digvijaya Gate.

The doors of the Mahameru Temple are made of silver. In the *garbha griha* pilgrims worship the *jyotirlingam* and a silver image of Lord Someshwar Mahadev seated under the spreading hood of a serpent. Siva is flanked by images of the goddess Mahishasuramardini and the sun god Suryadeva. The octagonal *garbha griha* is surrounded by a *pradakshina patha* for the circumambulation of the deity. The sanctum's *vimana* is topped by a great dome that is supported by eight pillars and eight arches. The main dome is surrounded by four smaller domes. The remains of the earlier temples, pieces of pillars and the plinth, still showing the beautiful ancient carvings, can be seen in the museum at nearby Prabhas Patan.

Prabhas Patan

Prabhas Patan is within walking distance of the Somnath Temple. Also called Bhalka Tirtha, this was the ancient Prabhas Tirtha mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. It stands at the confluence of the rivers — Kapila, Hiranya and an invisible Saraswati, and is therefore a sacred *triveni*. Here archaeologists have found the black and red earthenware dating to the Mauryan period (second century BC), which matches the tradition that Chanakya built a Somnath Temple here.

Prabhas Patan is a place redolent with myths. When Somadeva, the moon god, was cursed by Daksha, he came to Prabhas Patan to pray to Shiva to save him. It is said to be the place where Parashuram, the warrior avatar of Vishnu came to perform the severest of penances for the sin of having killed a human being. What makes Prabhas Patan a place of legends is its connections to characters in the *Mahabharata*. The Pandava brothers came here during their years of exile in the forest after they had lost their kingdom of Indraprastha. It is here that Vidura, their uncle, breathed his last and there is a cave here called Pandava Guha. Dronacharya, the teacher of the Hastinapur princes and the tribal warrior Eklavya also lived here. The Yadava clan ruling Dwarka came here to worship Shiva. As the *Krishnavatar* says, "At Prabhas, obeying the Lord, the Yadavas performed with great faith and devotion, all the rites conducive to their prosperity".

What makes Prabhas Patan a poignant place of pilgrimage is that Lord Krishna came here to die. Heart broken by the debauchery and self destruction of his Yadava clan, he entered the forest and rested under a tree, where the hunter Jara, mistaking him for a deer, pierced his foot with an arrow. In the 'Krishnavatara' it says, "Noticing the passing away of Balarama, the glorious Lord Krishna quietly went to a pippala tree and sat down on the ground with his back resting against its trunk, manifesting his real radiant four-armed form". Prabhas Patan is called *Dehotsarga* as Krishna left his mortal body here and once again merged into the radiance of Lord Vishnu.

When the Yadavas were on their path to self-destruction, Krishna had sent his charioteer Daruka to Indraprastha to ask

his friend Arjuna to come to Dwarka. By the time Arjuna arrived, both the brothers, Krishna and Balarama, had given up their lives. The seashore at Prabhas Patan lay strewn with the bodies of the Yadava men. Arjuna performed their funeral here by the banks of the three rivers at Triveni. Among his queens, Rukmini, Saibya and Haimavati committed sati on Krishna's funeral pyre while Satyabhama and others went to the forest to perform penances. Then Arjuna gathered together the women and children and took them with him to Indraprastha, while behind them a giant tidal wave rose from the sea and claimed Dwarka.

The marble Gita Mandir, standing at the Triveni Tirtha, commemorates those ancient events. The temple has been built by the Somnath Trust and has eighteen pillars with chapters from the *Bhagavat Gita* inscribed on them. The local people talk of a hidden underground passage that once connected this temple to the Somnath shrine and how some of the temple treasures were saved by priests who escaped through this passage.

In Prabhas Patan there is also an interesting ruin of an ancient sun temple. Probably built by the Solanki kings who had also constructed the Surya temple at Modhera, the sanctum has the image of Surya and his consort Sangyadevi. Nearby is the *Triveni* where pilgrims bathe at the confluence of the Kapila and Hiranya rivers. Legends say that the third river is the mysterious and invisible Saraswati. Some of the other temples in Prabhas Patan visited by pilgrims are Balarama Mandir, Nagasthan, Ballabhacharya temple and the intriguingly named Mahaprabhuji ka Baithak.

Modhera

Even before Konarak, one of the most beautiful sun temples was built at Modhera in Kathiawar. Even in its ruined state, architecturally the Modhera temple is among the finest in the country and it still displays the amazingly intricate work of the stone carvers of Gujarat — the *silavats*. The *silavats* turned temples into creations of pure sculpture, covering every inch of the walls, pillars and ceilings with carvings of dancing apsaras, deities, demons, flowering vines and animals.

Built in the 11th century during the reign of the Solanki king Bhimadeva, the temple stands on a high plinth and covers an area of 80 square metres. It predates by about two centuries the more famous sun temple at Konarak in Orissa. A pillared *natya mandapa* leads to an octagonal *sabha mandapa*, the main assembly hall and then is the sanctum of the *garbha griha*. Once the horse riding image of Surya must have stood in the heart of the temple but today the ruined *garbha griha* stands desolate and empty. As it is a sun temple, it is designed in such a manner that sunlight can fall directly into the sanctum. So the image of the deity of Surya was bathed in the sun's rays at every dawn and the equinoxes.

When Modhera was a living temple, on those sacred days of the equinox, the sun's rays must have entered through the doorways and arched openings, shimmered across the carvings to fall at the feet of the deity like a golden worshipper. Sadly, like Konarak, the main deity is missing but there are many carvings of the sun god in niches on the walls and pillars that give us an idea of how it may have looked. As in all the images of Surya that can be seen at other sun temples like at Konarak

in Orissa and Martanda in Kashmir, Surya is shown in rather unusual garments. He is depicted wearing high boots, an embroidered cloak and is often riding a chariot. As he is the majestic king of the skies, Surya's chariot is drawn by seven horses, symbolising the seven days of the week and it is driven by his charioteer Aruna, an aspect of dawn.

Designed with true grandeur, the pillars and walls are lavishly covered with carvings of lanquid *yakshis*, goddesses and dancers and intricate crocodile-shaped *makara toranas* curve across the arches. The *garbha griha*, the sanctum of the shrine has five window openings and the *mandovara* — a panelled wall — is richly embellished with carvings and figures. The spire of the *shikhara* is missing but it was probably made in the curvilinear shape in the *nagara* style that was commonly used in Gujarat.

There is a large, stepped sacred pool, a *surya kund* beside the temple and a flight of steps lead up from it to the main shrine through a carved and fluted archway. The steps leading down to the waters of the surya kund are decorated with images of deities set in niches. In spite of the missing *shikhara* and the *roofless* mandapas that have pillars staring at the sky, the Modhera sun temple is still a magnificent creation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Travelling to Dwarka

TRAVELLING TO DWARKA

Nearest airport: Jamnagar. 148 km.
Ahmedabad. 438 km.

STD code: 02892. Postal pin code: Dwarka: 361 335

By Train: Dwarka is connected to Jamnagar. Also trains connected to Mumbai, Rajkot and Ahmedabad.

Trains: Saurashtra Mail, Puri-Okha Express, Ahmedabad-Okha Passenger.

By Bus: There are buses from Ahmedabad, Porbandar, Rajkot and Jamnagar. Also package tours offered by the Tourism Corporation of Gujarat that begin from Ahmedabad and cover Dwarka and Somnath.

Distances by road: Ahmedabad: 438 km. Rajkot: 234 km. Jamnagar: 148 km. Junagarh: 332 km. Porbander: 120 km.

Somnath: 249 km. Bombay: 929 km.

Local transport: Private taxis, auto rickshaws and tongas.

TRAVELLING TO SOMNATH

Nearest railway station: Verawal. Somnath is 6 km from Verawal.

By Train from Ahmedabad to Verawal: Girnar Express, Somnath Mail.

By Bus: Connections to Ahmedabad, Diu, Jamnagar, Rajkot, Porbandar, Dwarka, Surat.

STD code: 02876

TRAVELLING TO MODHERA

Access: 104km from Ahmedabad. 550 km from Dwarka. 25 km from Mehsana.

Facilities: A museum in the temple complex, good lawns and a cafetaria run by the Gujarat Tourism Corporation.

By Train: Nearest railway station is Mehsana. Connected to Ahmedabad.

By Bus: There are regular buses to Modhera from Ahmedabad. The most convenient way is to take a luxury bus from Ahmedabad to Mehsana and then hire a jeep from there.

PACKAGE TOURS

Saurashtra Darshan Tour

Ahmedabad – Rajkot – Jamnagar – Dwarka – Porbander – Somnath – Sasan Gir – Girnar – Junagadh – Palitana – Lothal – Ahmedabad.

Duration – 5 days. Organised by Tourism Corporation of Gujarat.

** The tour leaves Ahmedabad every Friday at 6 am and returns by 9.30 pm on the following Tuesday.

** Cost is inclusive of transportation, accommodation, guide charges and entrance fees.

1st day – Start at Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Jamnagar City sightseeing, Dwarka.

Night halt at Dwarka Tourist Bungalow. Visit Dwarkadhish temple.

2nd Day – Bet-Dwarka, Dwarka, Harshad Mata and Porbander.

Night halt at Toran Tourist Bungalow, Porbander.

3rd Day – Somnath, Sasan Gir. Night halt at Junagadh Hotel, Girnar.

4th Day – Junagadh, Virpur, Palitana. Night halt at Toran Hotel Sumeru, Palitana.

5th Day – Jain temples on Shantrunjaya Hills, Lothal and back to Ahmedabad.

SHOPPING

The craftspeople of the Kathiawar region of Saurashtra make brightly woven woolen shawls and fabrics, brass and wooden *patara* boxes. Richly embroidered carpets, some even encrusted with semi precious stones, bright applique work or screen printed textiles are made at Junagadh. Intricately carved wood ware is made at Mahuva. The eye catching tie-and-dye *bandhani* textiles of Jamnagar are famous for their intricate motifs and brilliant colours.

ADDRESSES

Tourism Corporation of Gujarat Ltd.

WEBSITE: www.gujarattourism.com

AHMEDABAD

H.K.House, Opp. Bata Showroom, Ashram Road,
Ahmedabad – 380009.

Tel: 449683 / 449172. Fax: 079-6568183

Email: ahmedabad@gujarattourism.com

NEW DELHI

A/6 State Emporium Building, Baba Kharak Singh Marg,
New Delhi – 110001.

Tel: 3732107 / 3364724 / 3744015

MUMBAI

Dhanraj Mahal, Apollo Bunder, Bombay – 400039.

Tel: 2024925

CHENNAI

Mount Chambers, 2nd floor, 758 Anna Salai,
Chennai – 600002. Tel: 8522135

KOLKATA

06/C Salimpur Road, Dhakuria, Kolkata. Tel: 2423521

JAIPUR

Tourist Hotel (RTDC), M.I.Road, Jaipur – 302001.

VADODARA

Narmada Bhavan, C/Block, Indira Avenue, Baroda – 390001.
TEL: 427489 / 431297

ACCOMMODATION

At Dwarka: Toran Tourist Bungalow, Near Government Guest House. Tel: 34013. Guruprerna, Ravla Talao, Bhadrakali Temple. Tel: 34512 / 34360. Gokul, Near Main Post Office. Tel: 34154 / 34491. Rajdhani. Tel: 34070 / 34175. Dwarkesh, Near Swaminarayan Mandir. Tel: 34614 / 34290. Vandana, State highway. Tel: 34440. Radhika, Opp.S.T.Stand. Tel: 34754.

At Somnath: Sri Somnath Temple Trust Guest House. Tel: 20212. Hotel Mayuram, Triveni Road. Tel: 20286. Prabhas Guest House. Goverdhan Bhawan.

Glossary

Aarti	—	invocation with lights
Amman	—	Mother Goddess
Alvar	—	Vaishnava poet-saint
apsara	—	celestial nymph
ashram	—	religious retreat
asura	—	demon
avatar	—	incarnation of a deity
Bhagavat Gita	—	philosophical treatise
Bhairava	—	terrible aspect of Shiva
bhakti	—	Hindu devotionalism
Brahma	—	Lord of creation
Brahman	—	the Absolute, the formless being
brahmin	—	priestly class
chakra	—	Vishnu's discus
darshana	—	viewing the deity
devata	—	god
devi	—	goddess
dharma	—	religious law and custom
gandharva	—	celestial musician
garbha griha	—	sanctum of a temple
Garuda	—	eagle mount of Vishnu
gopuram	—	temple gateway

guru	—	teacher, saint
Holi	—	spring festival of colours
Jyotirlingam	—	the Shiva lingams of light
karma	—	past actions & their consequences
lingam	—	phallic symbol of Shiva
Mahabharata	—	epic poem of ancient war
mandapa	—	open pillared hall
mantra	—	sacred chants
marta	—	the earth
matha	—	monastery
Meru	—	mythical mountain
moksha	—	release from birth & death
Nandi	—	Shiva's bull
Nayanmar	—	shaiva poet-saint
nirvana	—	enlightenment
prasad	—	ritual offerings
puja	—	worship of deity
punya	—	merit
puranas	—	collection of myths & rituals
Ramayana	—	epic poem about Rama
ratha	—	temple chariot
rishis	—	seers who wrote ancient texts
sadhu	—	wandering ascetic
samsara	—	cycle of birth and death
sannyasin	—	wandering ascetic
shaiva	—	worshipper of Shiva
shakti	—	divine power of the Devi
shastra	—	ancient treatise
shloka	—	invocation
shubha	—	auspicious
shikhara	—	spire, tower
shuchi	—	pure
swarga	—	heaven

tirtha, tirthasthana	—	place of pilgrimage
tirthayatra	—	pilgrimage
vaikuntha	—	Vishnu's heaven
Vaishnava	—	worshipper of Vishnu
Vedas	—	oldest Hindu religious text
vihara	—	Buddhist monastery
Vishnu	—	Lord of Preservation
yajna	—	ritual of offerings

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The Indian Theogony	— Sukumari Bhattacharji
The Songs of the Bhagavat Gita	— (tr) Christopher Isherwood
Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India	— S.M. Bharadwaj
Yuganta	— Irawati Karve
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